THE NOVELS OF FRANK SWINNERTON

THE HAPPY FAMILY
ON THE STAIRCASE
THE CHASTE WIFE
NOCTURNE
SHOPS AND HOUSES

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SHOPS AND HOUSES

FRANK SWINNERTON

BY FRANK SWINNERTON

SHOPS AND HOUSES
NOCTURNE
THE CHASTE WIFE
ON THE STAIRCASE
THE HAPPY FAMILY

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

SHOPS AND HOUSES

BY

FRANK SWINNERTON

AUTHOR OF "NOCTURNE," ETC.

NEW YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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TO

HELEN

A LITTLE KEEPSAKE

L'inconvénient du règne de l'opinion, qui d'ailleurs procure la liberté, *c'est qu'elle se mêle de ce dont elle n'a que faire; par exemple: la vie privée. De là la tristesse de l'Amérique et de l'Angleterre.*"—STENDHAL.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	BOOK ONE: FRIENDS	PAGE
I.	Beckwith	11
II.	Apple House	33
III.	Louis	43
IV.	The Party	56
V.	Over the Shop	93
VI.	Women	102
VII.	An Encounter	119
VIII.	In the Train	130
IX.	Veronica	142
X.	Dorothy	154
XI.	The Break	165
XII.	Veronica's Bid	175
XIII.	Nadir	189
	BOOK TWO: LOVERS	
XIV.	The Rebel	207
XV.	Below the Surface	220
XVI.	The Concert	230
XVII.	Search	240
XVIII.	A New Friend	245
XIX.	Pain	254
XX.	Beckwith in the Dock	267
XXI.	Beckwith on the Bench	276
XXII.	Sunday Morning	289
XXIII.	Sunday Afternoon	297
XXIV.	Sunday Night	307
	Epilogue	317

BOOK ONE: FRIENDS

CHAPTER I: BECKWITH

i

UPON the south side of London, about fifteen miles from the city, and upon the nearest borders of Kent and Surrey, lies a small town which combines the characteristics of a suburb with those of a country village. It has some factories, and, near the railway, many poor little ugly houses; but the town itself is built around a really beautiful common, and the houses one sees from this common belong to a time when building was rather a fine art. The country upon all hands is wide and open, rippling with hedges and small clusters of wood; and Beckwith stands so high that from chosen spots one can enjoy the most lovely stretches of green, full of a brimming vitality that is moving in its simplicity. Within the town are roads of various widths and lengths, some finished and some unfinished, bedecked with houses of all sizes; and upon one side of the central common there are a few very decorous shops which are not much altered in appearance from older days when Beckwith was still a remote village. There are also a church and an hotel with the sign of a rampant lion. The railway has changed the town. It has given it new classes and even a new district. It has given it a new society. The station has had to be enlarged and its sidings increased in number within the last few years owing to the growth of goods traffic; and there is a cluster of mean-looking shops in a side street called "Station Road." They look a though

they had been hastily and half-heartedly built to meet a sudden emergency. Between some of them may still be seen plots of grassy land sprinkled with thistle and large-leaved weeds and bearing dilapidated sale boards. From a village to a small country town, from a country town to a suburb, Beckwith has progressed steadily in the direction of prosperity; and has forsaken the peace of its earlier existence. But at its silent heart, away from the factories and the railway-station, it remains lovely yet, and a home of sedate restfulness in spite of everything.

The principal person in Beckwith should be Lord Dayscombe; but Lord Dayscombe can hardly be said to be a Beckwithian, as he lives most of the time abroad. His lordship pretends to have forgotten his native language, and prefers to speak a rather harsh Italian. So Beckwith sees very little of him, and the Vechantors are the only family in the district to dine at Dayscombe when its owner is at home. Apart, therefore, from this aristocrat, the good society of Beckwith consists of the Vechantors, who are an old family of some standing, the Derricks, the Misses Ferris, Mrs. Jebolt and her valetudinarian husband, the Dauntons, the Grenvilles, the Dumaresques, the Peabodys, Miss Lampe, old Mr. Chator, Mrs. Dunton, the Hugheses, the Deadwoods, the Toppetts, the Greens, the Marches, the Corntofts, and Mrs. Callum. The Toppets are the Vicar and his wife and three children—one of whom wears round goggling spectacles, one of whom has a sort of bit in her mouth to restrain wildly-growing teeth, and one of whom obtrudes no defect at all upon the beholding eye. Kindly persons suppose the Toppetts to have profited by experience, because the perfect Toppett is the youngest. Mrs. Jebolt, however, cannot help wondering what secret malady the child suffers from. It is a constant preoccupation of hers—one of the things that

animate her to an extreme point. Fortunately Mrs. Jebolt is such a good-natured person that nobody supposes she means what she says, and so the young Toppett is everywhere treated as relatively sound. Only Mrs. Jebolt puts searching questions.

Below these families, who are known to the surrounding poor as "gentry," there is a slightly lower order of society, mostly Noncomformists, very good and kind, but not especially remarkable. They have their own events and visitings; but they do not freely mix with the class above. In a class below these are the tradespeople. Lowest of all comes the uncouth throng that labours locally. It is a very matter-of-fact class, restless and improvident, and is just upon the point of being spoilt by what it calls "pleasure," which consists in the expenditure of all surplus earnings upon cheap entertainments, from kinemas at a larger town three miles away, to cigarettes, brooches, etc., purchased in Station Road. The town is on the whole happy and contented; but as its population increases it is losing corporate sense. It is less individualistic than indifferent. The classes are becoming very clearly separated, and the feeling of common interest in the well-doing of Beckwith is diminishing. This is because the majority of ordinary women are egoists in good-fortune, and only share their sorrows.

In the town are shops of various kinds, in addition to those lined so prettily upon one side of the common. There is, in the wider road leading away from the green, a series of quite large shops, and these large shops are the ones at which the real Beckwithians deal. No real Beckwithian has anything sent from the Stores, for the real Beckwithian preserves his ancient motto of *noblesse oblige*. So while there is a little old chemist's shop, and the post-office, and a butcher's, and a baker's, overlook-

ing the common, Peel's, the big grocer's shop, is in the High Street, and so is the jeweller's, and the oilman's, and the bookseller's and stationer's. They are large shops, well-stocked, modern; their prices are carefully measured, and their prosperity seems to be all that can be desired.

Out of the High Street are roads of medium-sized houses, rather new, with gravelled paths and lawns and geraniums in front of them. These are inhabited by the second-class people of Beckwith. They are red houses with slate roofs, and the points of the roofs are decorated with little red tiles like cockscombs. The best houses are round the common, including some of the smallest, which contain, in a few cases, only seven or eight rooms; but there are one or two at a distance from the common, and Miss Lampe even lives quite near the railway-station, so that she knows altogether by heart what trains are caught by what residents in the town. This situation is very fortunate for Miss Lampe, who passionately cares for such facts and is dependent upon them for her casual conversation.

ii

Naturally the society of Beckwith, cut off from any general communication with the outer world, is very close: its moral scrutiny, the surest safeguard of manners in the modern universe, is so exacting that any slightest infringement is observed and quietly punished. There is no account made of "I didn't know." "Didn't know was made to know," as somebody once said. These ladies are Roman—or is it Spartan?—in their severity to each other. One would think that a quite special piece of righteousness had been dealt out to each of them at birth by a benign fairy. They do not so much love one another as guard one another. In no place is the "cut"

more noticeable, the chilling of welcome more adroitly managed. Ah, the guilty know! All the ladies are very sensitive. The cut accidental is followed with appalling speed by the retaliatory cut deliberate. It takes quite a long time to be quite sure whether the accident is altogether forgiven; and a repetition will certainly involve ignominious exclusion from more than one house in the neighbourhood. The wrong thing said or done flies like ill-tidings from lip to lip, from eye to eye, very secretly, very finally. Living in Beckwith is like living upon glass. It is both slippery and brittle.

The cause of this is that when one lives in Beckwith one has very little wider life. The consideration in which one is held by one's neighbours (in default of special talent, which is rare in Beckwith, and which raises a barrier of constraint) is the only consideration which one can enjoy. It must therefore be conserved, augmented, by more or less adroit revelations made in talk. And the uplifting of one's own importance brings about, in one's acquaintance, the desire for equal upliftings of importance. Badly managed, it may estrange them. Inconsiderate exaggeration is known as "swank." Swank is met by swank, coldness, satirical gossip. . . . One speaks, let us for example say, of an eminent person whom one has encountered by happy accident; and this suit is grimly followed. One says, perhaps, "I went into that delightful place in Panton Street—don't you know it? I thought *everybody* knew it!—and saw Bubb, the ex-Cabinet Minister, simply gorging himself on steak and onions." Hardly has one spoken before Mrs. Grenville blurts out: "How nice! I remember being *introduced* to the Bishop of Tanganwego one day when I was in town. At the Berkeley. It isn't often I go. . . . One really is so tied when one lives in the country. Such a nice little man. He told me quite a lot of things about his

. . . It was delightful!" One sees that the connection is supplied, not by any peculiarity in diet, but solely by the worldly distinction of the person named. This has its further illustrations, steadily rising in a scale of notability or affluence. A canon is eclipsed by a dean, a cartoonist by an R. A. Higher than a dean or an R.A. one can hardly go in Beckwith. A visit to Paris or Paris-Plage is less effective than a holiday in the Ardennes, the Jura, Italy. . . . Any pretence to foreign experience, therefore, is instantly countered or exceeded. It is very quietly done—not noisily, as it would be by flat-dwellers or the wives of military men—but it is rather bitter; and afterwards the justice-administering wives tell their husbands, or the friends their friends. "I really *had* to tell her we'd been to Genoa, and had met Lady Bandermere. . . . She was so *unspeakably* intolerable with her tales of Trouville . . . the idea! Nasty common place! Everybody goes there!"

But these stirs are momentary. They are accidental; merely the challenging pummelling spirit which produces the survival of the fittest. What wit does in circles where wit is current coin, such bludgeon rivalry does in Beckwith. One settles down, also, to a very fair system of free give and take, because of course the exact degree of consideration due to each person is bound sooner or later to be established. It may vary with breeze or tide; but its fundamental laws are unchangeable. Thus and thus is the immutable order; and if one were altogether too exclusive, and demanded excessive respect, without repaying it in kind, there would be no social life in Beckwith at all. Besides, there are flatteries. . . . One is gladly deferred to about Italy (whether song-birds are to be heard there or whether they are killed for food) if one is ready to waive a right to speak of the social life of bishops. If one accepts Mrs.

Callum's authority upon the moral defects of authors—this is a very special topic indeed—Mrs. Callum will be ready to interrupt any conversation whatever with "Oh —Russia. You must ask Mrs. *Corntoft* about *Russia*. Her sister's *lived* there."

The Vechantors have no need of all this measuring, which is common to almost all the residents in Beckwith; but then perhaps the Vechantors are rather apart from the generality of their neighbours. They have always lived in Beckwith; and they are well-to-do, and have no tracks to cover, because they have always been well-to-do and extremely domesticated. They are so artlessly sure of being first in the town that they do not seem at any time to be on the watch for those slights and favouritisms that become important in any small community. The others are not ridiculous or merely foolish. They are reacting normally to their environment, to the intensive culture which is produced by any form of human segregation. They suffer with a kind of dull and aching fortitude from their limited physical horizons and from that instinctive human craving for something that will assure them of their right to live. It is a form of ill-breeding, but it is pathetic rather than contemptible. It arises from overmuch time unoccupied or falsely occupied with trivial and inessential things, which gives opportunity for morbid thoughts; and it arises from that passionate desire felt by every individual for love. The desire to be loved, when it sours, becomes the desire to be considered. If we are not by nature important to others, as few can be, we become important to ourselves, and that kind of egoism is so little based upon self-reliance that it suffers from a kind of eating diabetes, so constant is its need for nourishment. Nearly all, but not quite all, of the women in Beckwith suffer from this aimlessness of life, this insatiable egomania. Some of the men

are empoisoned with it. Several women and most of the men are free from all such trouble. The Vechantors, who pronounce the "ch" as if it were "k," and accent the middle syllable of their name, are altogether above it. They appear to live a kind of life apart, a humane life, which is nourished from within.

iii

The present occupants of Apple House are Emanuel Vechantor and his wife and son. Emanuel's grandfather began life in the house of certain wholesale importers of tea. He increased his power in that business and ultimately controlled its fortunes. When he was able to do so he sold the business and invested the greater part of his money in a newly-formed mercantile bank which he also made a success; and it is from this bank that subsequent Vechantors have drawn their ample subsistence. The grandfather had a younger brother, a failure, who disappeared from polite society, and was reported to have emigrated. He was supposed to be dead long before he did die—the wish that he might be dead assisting to bury him alive; but that was years ago, and nobody has thought about him for fifty or sixty years. It has always been felt that he was best forgotten. Accordingly it may be said that from Stephen Vechantor —the grandfather—there has descended the sole line of Vechantors; and the family has been so unprolific that both Emanuel and his father were only sons. This rule applies also to the present generation, for Emanuel has no more than two children. Beatrice, the elder, is married; and Louis, after an elaborate education by private tutors and afterwards at Oxford, is the active partner in the business of Vechantor & Co. His father visits the office once a week: Louis goes every day.

The Vechantors live at the house that hides behind large gates at the extreme western edge of the common. It runs beside the road which goes west, towards the Kentish main roads; but it is protected by a beautiful old red wall, ivy grown and adorable. Through the large gates one sees from the common's edge a garden opening and spreading beyond the first lawn upon the right of the house—an apparently limitless wealth of green, studded in summer time with a glorious jewel-like mass of crimson rambler. The front door is at the left of the entry to the garden: it reveals a lofty porch and a wide hall beyond, which suggests to the caller comfort inexpressible, and which is warm in winter and deliciously cool in summer time.

Everything is very quiet in the house. Quiet as Beckwith is in general there is a calm about Apple House which one cannot help noticing. The floors are thickly carpeted, so that no footfall is heard. When the clock in the drawing-room chimes dimly the silver notes throb the air and echo for a perceptible time after they have been struck. The grandfather clock in the entrance hall is hardly heard: it seems to tell the hours to itself, like a parrot repeating inaudible conversation. The house, besides being very quiet, is very spacious and beautiful. The Vechantors have always been people of taste, it seems; for the furnishing of the house contains nothing that could distress even the most modern eye. That is a thing which Louis had observed at once on returning from Oxford. Fresh from the fashion of the world, and from a society of which fashion is exigent, he was surprised to find that his own home was not grotesque. After all, the Vechantors, it might have occurred to him to think, as the Duke of Plaza-Toro did upon another occasion, do not *follow* fashions: they lead them! The truth being that they take no notice of them.

Living as they do, in an assured position, without cares of any galling kind, the Vechantors feel none of the frenetic anxiety about "standing" which riddles the lives of their neighbours. It has not occurred to them, for so many years, to think of improving their social position, that they have little sympathy with those who are, socially, standing upon tiptoe. It can never occur to them to envy anybody, and they are much too well-bred to wish to make other people fall into their ways, or imitate them, in order that they may dominate a clique. They are at Beckwith; they are kind and courteous; Mrs. Vechantor has no hostilities or jealousies. She leads a simple, happy life. Her husband leads a life that is rather less happy although it is almost equally simple. Her daughter Beatrice, who lives with her husband in Hertfordshire, forty miles away, leads a life that is ever so much less simple and that might be a very happy one if her restless temperament allowed. The life of Louis, Mrs. Vechantor's only son, and the peculiarities of his character, are to be described at more length in the pages that follow.

iv

Louis Vechantor, standing upon this Autumn evening before the drawing-room fire, waiting for the dinner-gong, seems to his mother to be rather like what she remembers her husband to have been at the same age. He is rather tall, extremely dark, and he wears pince-nez and a small black moustache. His dress—the Vechantors dress for dinner every evening, unless they have certain visitors—is that of a young man of some pretensions to fashion. His hair is glossy and black, his nose long and thin, his mouth moderately small and gravely closed. His face is thin and pale, but his body

is well developed and full of grace. He is between twenty-six and twenty-seven. At first sight one looks with disappointment for that sparkle of cordiality which in a young man creates at once an air of charm. The sparkle is not there. Louis is distinctly cold. Then one wonders, still rather disappointedly, whether some strength of character lies behind his impassivity; and while this scrutiny is in progress one is rather disconcerted to find that it is being returned from behind the pince-nez by a pair of steel-grey eyes. There is no suggestion of harshness about the face. It is even handsome. But one thinks that perhaps Mrs. Vechantor, whose affection is palpable, must be suffering from the mother-complaint, and that her swan is perhaps a sober enough gander for Beckwith and a domesticated future.

As a relief from such doubts one turns to Mrs. Vechantor herself, a white-haired lady of sixty, with a calm, ivory face, hardly wrinkled, and a slim figure which suggests continued youth. As she sits in the shadow of a tall screen, Mrs. Vechantor seems to make one think of beautiful, imperishable tones in pictures by the Dutch artists. One sees how the quietness of this house surrounds her and belongs to her. In her kind, grave old eyes one finds the graceful authority from which flows the perfect order of the house. Life must have passed very pleasantly, one thinks, for this lady: she can have had no miseries. And that is really true. Mrs. Vechantor has been happily married, happy in her motherhood, and she is now happy in her measured and occupied elderly age. She is especially happy in her only son, who is waiting for his dinner with a kind of pleasant thoughtfulness.

The door opens, and the parlourmaid admits new arrivals.

"Mr. and Mrs. Toppett, ma'am. Miss Lampe . . ."

The room is instantly in a flutter and a wonderful uproar. The Vicar and his wife stand quietly beaming; but their fellow-traveller has begun in an extraordinarily shrill voice to address her hostess for the evening. Miss Lampe is a shrivelled little lady with bead-like eyes, who dresses eternally in a black poplin cut upon such an antique model that she always looks the same and as if she had worn black poplin since her birth. She has advanced at a kind of run, speaking continuously. Even while Mrs. Vechantor is welcoming the Toppetts, Miss Lampe is still lavishing her conversation with the fine carelessness of Nature.

v

Supposing one had been present at this scene one would have noticed that with the entrance of these visitors Louis and his mother, although perfectly unchanged in manner, had separated themselves finally from the normal standards of Beckwith. Speaking to Mr. Toppett, Louis had become by contrast more distinguished. His attitude was still lacking in animation; but his movements were perfect and his breeding perceptible. Mr. Toppett seemed provincial beside him. The Toppetts beamed; Miss Lampe was over-emphatic. They were almost constrained, all three. Yet it was not through any failure of tact or courtesy on the part of the Vechantors. They were perfectly at ease; entirely without pretentiousness. Perhaps the difference lay in that fact? One saw that Louis was not, as a first glance had seemed to indicate, the sleek, well-groomed young man of the City. He was something else. He had the air of shining from within. It was curious that the nearness of the clergyman should have created such a clear impression by contrast. Mr. Toppett was far from being an ignoramus; his knowl-

edge of Church History was considerable: upon the subject of his Church he could show himself well-informed and eloquent. He was a Churchman, as irreverent observers might have remarked, before he was a Christian: doctrine, history, the innumerable points at which approved practice departs from impulsive observance, were for him matters of unsurpassed moment. There was no Low Church rapprochement with Dissent in Beckwith. Cordial to all, Mr. Toppett was iron where conformity was engaged in its battle for supremacy. He was far from Rome; but his jaw stiffened abruptly, and he became parochial, at any serious theological backsliding. He was a well-built man with a common, bull-dog face. He wore his hair cropped short, and his mouth was the ugly mouth of a public speaker, dropped at one corner. His way of looking and turning was blunt, rather pressingly bluff. One had the sense of large hands and a narrow, efficient judgment. He was well-trained, practical, warm-hearted; but if anybody in Beckwith had known what imagination was she would have sought vainly for it in Mr. Toppett's sermons or in his everyday attitude to worldly things. For him the material world represented reality: his teaching was one of accommodation with materialism, not hostility to it. He was in fact a materialist with a belief in a practicable hereafter of rewards and punishments. In his way of coming to the point Mr. Toppett eschewed finesse: he had no use for it because it would not have availed him in Beckwith. His retorts to neurasthenic parishioners were well known for their outrightness: he would stand no nonsense from others, just as he would stand no nonsense from himself. This and this was the doctrine of the Church: one either conformed to it or one left the Church alone. From the pulpit he gave each week, not ghostly counsel, but good ethical instruction

in which the teaching of the Church, at its most orthodox, was implicit. It was also frequently explicit: Mr. Toppett told his congregation what they must do. He was not a begging-parson, and he was not an evangelical dealer in exhortation. He was rough, hard-hitting, colloquial; but he satisfied the men by his acceptance of common sense as the guiding light in ordinary affairs, and attracted the women by his robustness, his manly grappling with things near at hand. On Saturday afternoons he played for the excellent town cricket team. The women who wished to worship emotionally walked to a village church a mile and a half away, or they indulged in another denomination.

Louis, listening to Mr. Toppett's competent account of a political crisis in progress at that time, heard the ugly voice and saw the cold eyes of his companion with some appreciation. He liked the man for his honesty—or his apparent honesty; and he respected his power to grasp very clearly, if ordinarily, the details of political forays. Mr. Toppett was a moderate politician, a Conservative with an interest in social amelioration, a patriot, a believer in strong government. He was only offensive to those with vehement views, who thought that he regarded the two-party system too much as if its purity and its God-given efficaciousness were above question. He honestly did think that the social order was moving steadily to perfection. And in this moment he was speaking of the political clash in terms of the House of Commons and of grave political correspondents. He took it for granted that the House of Commons represented the country. It was a saying with him that a nation generally has the government it deserves. His hatred of advanced political views, of anarchy, was such that he would often say, "A nation . . . we must be a nation, not a mob." He feared democracy, and he was

not afraid to proclaim the fear. "Good government," he would explain, "is strong government. Put the mob in power; and stability is gone. You are at the mercy of unpractical idealists and designing demagogues." He had a profound dislike of Mr. Bernard Shaw. "A harlequin," he thought him. Mr. Toppett could speak freely of all these matters to his parishioners, because all the men in Beckwith, whether Liberal or Conservative, were at one upon such points of policy. At elections they voted one way or the other because they had grown up calling themselves Liberals or Conservatives, born to it, as W. S. Gilbert's sentry realised in his reflectiveness; but in fact they were all a part of the backbone of the country, all sound as bells upon the question of property, the party-system, a strong navy, no conscription, limited monarchy; divided only about Home Rule for Ireland and Making the Foreigner Pay. They had for years concentrated upon these beliefs, and none of them would budge upon any point which he had accepted in more tender years. The close, slow beliefs of men do not change: Mr. Toppett could not have kept pace with a changeable Beckwith. With the Beckwith of reality he was in close touch. He really did represent the men of Beckwith and was the right man to give them each Sunday his thoughts of the week upon questions of conduct. He never thundered: he made his auditors respect him from the front pews to those at the back of his bare and beautiful church. He had the world well in hand; and he believed that the doctrine of the Christian Church supplied an answer to all spiritual dubitations. He thought it the only intellectual system for which as much could be claimed. He was no mystic.

And yet one felt that Louis was subtly different from Mr. Toppett. Not that he was wiser or more admirable but just that he was more distinguished and capable of

perhaps finer insights. That is not a capacity of much use in practical affairs, where the practical man is essential; but the existence from time to time of men like Louis Vechantor is not without its significance. He was a less typically useful person than Mr. Toppett; but he was rather more intriguing to the imagination.

vi

Miss Lampe was terribly eager with her news. She could hardly wait until they were all at the dinner-table (for Mr. Vechantor arrived two minutes before the gong), so keen was she upon making her statement. She was like a cabinet minister who has been forced to resign. The desire to impart the *truth* washed out all her horizons. But even Miss Lampe felt herself controlled by events and by the arrival of Mr. Vechantor and the ringing of the gong; and so the news did not lose its effectiveness through being blurted out to half the party. It was kept back. It simmered in her mind, so that she could not pay attention to what was being said around her. How provoking Louis was, thought Miss Lampe. It almost seemed as though he were encouraging Mr. Toppett to speak interminably of the political crisis. Mr. Toppett was crumbling bread and speaking as to broad-minded equals. His voice went on and on, like the voice of Freedom on the heights of old. Really, Miss Lampe could not bear it any longer! She turned rudely to her host.

"This political crisis," said she to Mr. Vechantor. "It seems very serious, doesn't it? Dreadfully!"

Mr. Vechantor agreed. He smiled at Miss Lampe, who bored him.

"Yes," he said, rather dryly, forking a glance at her from beneath his bushy grey brows. "Yes. Very

serious. It will make a great difference to Beckwith."

Miss Lampe did not pause to read his remark—which was one reason why she bored Mr. Vechantor, who was one of those elderly gentlemen who like their words (especially their ironical words) to be as deliberately weighed by hearers as they have been by the speaker. She was too eager to get her conversational "liaison."

"So true," she said. "Everywhere, of course, but especially in Beckwith. Dear me, in matters of change——"

"We stand on the verge of a great issue," said Mr. Toppett, barely interrupted by this impatient explosion. "There is a revolutionary ferment in this country that may lead in time to chaos, to anarchy. Not yet. Not to-morrow; but one looks, I hope, politically, beyond to-morrow. The mass of the people are excellent; but there is a dangerous intellectual element of a rather superior class that I fear. . . . Men, and women, born poor, or born idealistic, which is even more dangerous, who are so intoxicated with the power to think for themselves that they are irresponsibly carrying the right of private judgment to a perilous excess."

Louis gravely assented to this proposition. Miss Lampe looked chagrined.

"Very dangerous," she said. "And indeed *any* change is unsettling. . . . I was——"

"Have you decided if you'll be at home for Christmas, Miss Lampe?" asked Mrs. Toppett.

"Ah, Beckwith for me," said Miss Lampe. "I only went away last Christmas for a very special reason. An old friend—*very* ill. . . . I'm not like *some* people. Beckwith's been my home for twenty-two years; and I was *very* surprised to hear——"

How unfortunate Miss Lampe was! At that moment she had to help herself to vegetables, and she was not

one of those people who can talk coolly while they are performing this act. The dishes wobble so if they are impatiently attacked! It really seemed as though everything presented itself as an obstacle to her. During the meal she was foiled again and again. It was only by refusing fruit that she could make sure of her opportunity. She then, while the others were bent upon difficult tasks, seized the table with her fingers and thumbs (to give herself support) and directed a shrill outcry to the ceiling. She did not look at anybody. She simply said, very loudly:

"Such a piece of news! Mr. Peel has sold his business; and they're going to leave Beckwith and move to Croydon!"

"Ah yes," said Mr. Toppett, stupidly and callously. "So I heard to-day. We shall miss Peel."

vii

"Peel," said Mr. Vechantor. "He's the grocer, isn't he? Oh, of course I remember. He's a member of your congregation, isn't he, Toppett?"

"A very good sort of man," Mr. Toppett affirmed.

"His groceries are very good," said Mrs. Vechantor. "Though some of them seem to me a little dear."

"Do you know who's bought the business?" asked Louis. So it was he, after all, who gave Miss Lampe her opportunity of distended explanation. She would have beamed upon him if there had been time.

"No. I don't know *that* much. I just happened to meet Mrs. Peel, who was coming away from the station—she'd come back by the three o'clock train—and I stopped her—you know I always do, ever since I was able to help her when she had that little girl ill—and asked after the little girl. And so she said she was just back from

going to Croydon, and she'd been there to see a house Mr. Peel had bought, and how Mr. Peel had sold his business. I asked her if she knew who had bought it—I was so afraid it might be one of those big firms of purveyors, because it would be *such* a pity if one of them came to spoil dear little Beckwith;—but she didn't know. She said it had all been done through an agent, and she thought the whole sale had been carried through privately. So she couldn't tell me anything, except that they expected to be going at the end of the year and the new people coming on the first of January. I said I hoped the new people would be just as satisfactory as Mr. Peel had been, but that we should miss his cheery face and his obligingness . . ."

"Oh, certainly," said Mrs. Toppett agreeably. "But it will be nice to have a change. I always thought Mr. Peel's . . . *beard* was rather red." She had been going to say "whiskers"; but Mr. Vechantor wore a grey beard, and the memory of this, or perhaps the sight of it, saved her from indiscretion. "Really, it's *very* red, you know. Perhaps I'm fastidious."

"It's the redness of his face," Louis explained. "The two reds clash rather. As a rule red hair goes with a pale complexion; but Peel is abnormal. I wonder what makes his face so red."

Miss Lampe's mouth became pinched. She was a prude, and couldn't proclaim her intuitions. Had she been with Mrs. Callum she would have said, simply, "he drinks"; but she could not say such a thing before the Vechantors and the Vicar. It would have seemed rather outrageous, even to Miss Lampe.

"Well, the only thing to do is to hope that his successor will be a good grocer," said Mrs. Vechantor. "At any rate, it's to be hoped that he will be as good a grocer as Mr. Peel."

"And as good a man," added Mr. Toppett urbanely.

"That, of course," she retorted. "But I'm just being selfish, because it would be so very inconvenient if the local grocer were a cheat, or supplied bad goods. One can't be too careful."

"As soon as I hear anything, I'll let you know," said Miss Lampe. "I always say," she supplemented, with dreadful naïveté, "that half the pleasure of hearing a thing is the thought of repeating it. Don't you think it is?" She gave a sort of nervous titter and swept Louis's face with her shrewd examining eyes.

viii

It was afterwards, when Miss Lampe was being accompanied upon her way home by the Vicar and his wife, that there occurred between the three of them a singular conversation about the people with whom they had so amicably been dining.

"How nice it is," Mrs. Toppett suddenly observed, "to meet such people as the Vechantors. There's something so . . . I don't exactly know what it is . . . something . . . as if they'd never had anything at all troublesome or uncomfortable in their lives . . ."

"Mrs. Vechantor's the perfect lady," said her husband gravely. "Quite perfect. There's——"

"*So* charming," said Miss Lampe. "One feels one's with people . . . who *really* matter."

"Yes: doesn't one. Not a bit of side." Mrs. Toppett was quite frankly enthusiastic. "I like going there. It's like going among human beings."

"My dear!" protested Mr. Toppett.

"No, Harold; it really is! One feels—at least, I do," she added, with charming ingenuousness, "as though . . . Well, everybody in Beckwith is awfully nice and kind . . ."

"But the *Vechantors* . . ." supplemented Miss Lampe.

"Of course," Mr. Toppett explained, "it's quite true that they've always been rather wealthy. One has to remember that. It's not as though they weren't quite at the head of our little society."

They were passing at this moment down a dark lane which led towards the station, and a fresh breeze rustled the few remaining leaves of trees invisible to them in this opaque darkness of late Autumn. Mrs. Toppett shivered slightly. A sudden gust of wind had chilled her and made her think of her three babies.

"It's not that altogether," she persisted. "I *like* Mrs. Vechantor so much. I feel that she's . . . you know . . . *really* sympathetic with what one feels."

"I'm afraid you're giving Miss Lampe a wrong impression," suggested her husband "There's a great deal of real sympathy in Beckwith." He was much too shrewd a man not to see that a confidence, however innocent, is dangerous in such darkness, in such a mood of enthusiasm, when one's hearer is a lady with a tongue and ears and a very quick sense of the unpleasant.

"Miss Lampe knows what I mean," said Mrs. Toppett warmly. "It's nothing at all to be confused about. I'm sure I have many friends in Beckwith. They are charming people. No, I can't quite express what I feel. It's just that I feel so happy at Apple House. . . . It's like a holiday. . . ."

She was being horribly indiscreet; but her tongue was out of control, and she was easily moved by darkness, and might then have confided things which she would afterwards regret having said. Miss Lampe was avidly listening, her eyes well-open, and her lips parted.

"Oh, *quite,*" she said. "It's a change . . ."

"I'm never quite sure how far Mr. Vechantor is sympathetic," said Mr. Toppett guardedly. "He is always

most considerate. He's quite the grand man of affairs, I feel."

"Yes. I wish I understood Louis, too," exclaimed his wife. "I must admit he rather mystifies me."

"That's strange . . . I never feel that . . ." said her husband. "Possibly it's because I've known him so long. I always feel he's . . . well, if that weren't rather an odd word to apply to a young man, I think I should describe him as 'sound.' With so many young men of our day there's a kind of forced levity—a self-consciousness that won't allow them to be serious. . . ."

"He's very serious," said Mrs. Toppett.

"Well, . . . *is* he?" suddenly demanded Miss Lampe. "I sometimes wonder."

"Oh, do tell us what you mean!" begged Mrs. Toppett. "It sounds *so* mysterious!"

"Perhaps I ought not to say it; but sometimes I wonder . . . I wonder if Louis is quite all that we think him . . ." hinted Miss Lampe. She also was rather moved to expansiveness by their complete concealment from each other.

"Of course, he's a young man; and we know that young men . . ." Mr. Toppett was disposed to reconcile matters in this way. "But, speaking for myself, I've always found Louis very attentive, very much inclined—as few young men are—to hear what his elders have got to say."

"Ye-es," hesitated Miss Lampe. "Yes . . . I suppose he is. . . . And yet I've sometimes thought . . . I can't help feeling that he's apt to over-value himself. You see . . . as though he was . . . just a little . . . just a little *amused* at anything we say!"

They were all rather silent until they reached Miss Lampe's house. It was such an odd idea.

CHAPTER II: APPLE HOUSE

i

IT was not until the week before Christmas that anything further happened at Beckwith; for events go slowly in that town. Daily the society of the district wound yet more tightly the never-ending ball of its general relation. Visiting days hurried by; thick skeins of talk were unravelled to make the general resource of local life: marketing was done, meals eaten, parties given, songs sung, dresses brought out and laid away again; and still nothing really happened in Beckwith. Nothing serious ever did happen there. That was a part of its charm. It was like a backwater. A writer with a gift for sentimental fantasy could have made it the scene of a thousand delightful unrealities. Only time was consumed. Nothing could have increased the eagerness with which precious time was consumed. As if time were not so valuable! Yet Beckwith was a cormorant in its consumption of time. No dragon of old could more ravenously have demanded its feasts of young virgins. Kill time! Watch this affair and that, bring blushes to maiden cheeks, stiltedness to young male manners; eat, drink, and be ever engaged in the consumption of precious time! That was the secret, terrible aim of dwellers in Beckwith. To eat a day and look forward to the next with insatiable appetite! Little concerts in half-warmed Church Rooms, little amateur theatricals and dances in the shabby Town Hall—anything to destroy the danger

that lurks in unoccupied time. Never mind if the things are useless, if hours of planning are wasted upon a futile ceremony of some sort! Dress your children in flimsy clothes and let them take cold; but force them into the paths of emulation and excitement so that they shall thoroughly enjoy life, and get the most out of it. It is necessary: restlessness demands an outlet, not in constructive action, not in clear-thinking, nor in real festivals or the cultivation of growth; but solely in the destruction of time and the resuscitation of exhausting excitements. Satan finds work for idle hands to do, and Satan must be foiled. How the brave ladies of Beckwith kept Satan at bay! They talked and performed their local duties from hour to hour, unhesitatingly putting away any thought for the future if only the tomorrow might be measurably occupied. And so the weeks passed, and Christmas came about. There would be waits (they began to moan like dead leaves in the porches from the beginning of December, each batch driven to begin earlier so as to forestall for economic reasons the other batches, who received smaller rewards); there were puddings to be made and presents to be planned, and the churches to be decorated, and invitations to be given. A thousand bizarre manifestations of modesty and jealousy were necessary for the creation of a social atmosphere of seasonable gaiety. Miss Lampe must see and record parcels brought from the station; Mrs. Jebolt must watch from the window to see what Mrs. March was doing in the opposite house in her working pinafore at twelve o'clock in the day; Mrs. Derrick must hear the truth about Mrs. Daunton's son and his affair with a most unfortunate young woman who worked somewhere in the City; Mrs. Callum must observe the Deadwoods' maid walking with a young man in the Station Road, and laugh because he had squeaky

boots and cleared his throat rather proudly—as if, poor being, he thought he was "in love"! *So* funny that people of *that* sort . . . So, consumed in activities, these cheerful Beckwithians prepared for the festival before them. It was the way they had always lived. It "suited" them; and as the days drew to a close they exclaimed with relish: "How the time goes! I must do this and this to-morrow, or I shall never be finished by Christmas!" There seemed to be a general busy-ness in the air. Even good friends passed each other, beaming, in the street, as speechless as if they were still holding pins or pieces of string in their mouths. They all understood: it was a part of life: the season was giving them rare occupation and concern with the needs of others. They even smiled when they heard the waits in the porches, although the waits sometimes distracted their thoughts and made their husbands rather irritable. . . .

ii

At Apple House the Vechantors seemed to be as peaceful as usual. Mrs. Vechantor had made or bought all her presents, and the puddings were standing in splendid rows in a special section of the store-room. At Apple House everything was prepared so gradually that the maids hardly knew how much extra work had been done until they saw the visible evidence of it before their astonished eyes. They then admired Mrs. Vechantor. She had few servant troubles. All the other Beckwith ladies had them; but once at Apple House maids were not attracted elsewhere. They met other maids, and discoursed; and the other maids went home discontented. If the Vechantors had not been so well established in the district there might even have been some feeling against them among the puzzled mistresses of the town.

But these, vaguely understanding the attractions of superior service, more clearly defined work, and the general charm of Apple House, merely sighed and talked among themselves, rather helplessly, as a Cabinet must do about Labour Troubles and the Revolutionary Ferment which from time to time arises among the lower orders.

Upon an evening about a week before Christmas the Vechantors were dining alone. The evening was very cold, and there was snow outside. Upon every bare branch it stood like a thick white rim, and the ground was laden with its heavy carpeting. Lights across the common had a pretty frozen air, for the wind was shrewd. It carried the snowflakes that fell crisply from invisible clouds far above the farthest point of vision. All the common was white. The windows themselves had little drifts of melting snow upon the panes, snow that began to trickle down in streams of mottled wet as the warmth of the rooms dissolved the driven flakes. It was a winter night, that made rooms more cheerfully cosy than ever. Except for the indefatigable waits the streets of Beckwith were empty. At Apple House the gong had gone, and dinner was ready to be served. Only Mr. Vechantor, who always stayed in his room until the last minute, reading Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," was awaited.

At last he too came, having for the twentieth time savoured the wonderful account of Julian the Apostate, and the party was complete. With a good deal of manner Mr. Vechantor took the head of the table—a tall old man with grey hair and beard and a rather fine face. He had long and very thin hands, with which he smoothed back his moustaches; and every now and then he would throw about him a quick glance from under his bushy eyebrows, so that he seemed periodically to see every-

thing, corrosively. It was not known how much he saw, or what he saw, for Mr. Vechantor did not say a great deal. Perhaps not more than five thousand words in a day. Yet the speed of his black eyes in their lightning darts was immeasurable. It suggested a retention of an altogether unusual amount of intellectual youth and energy.

Opposite to Mr. Vechantor sat his wife, clothed in a beautiful dress of amber silk, with real old lace at her breast and wrists. The dress heightened the clear beauty of her face. She looked all the more delicate (though, of course, not at all fragile) because of the soft contrast of her dress and its lace trimmings. She too had a very clear glance; but it was not sudden, as her husband's was, and it saw a great deal without seeming to do so. She lived in a curious world of thought which was almost understanding. She was always speculating about character, not watchfully, but as if she lived in a fairy story or a saga, and sang out the secrets of those who were in her company. Only she sang them, as it were, to herself; and the ladies of Beckwith never knew. That was why they admired her so much, and were mystified by her. She never told what she saw.

Between them sat Louis, very well-groomed and rather too spotless. He had his mother's clear glance, but it was obviously more scrutinising; and his pince-nez helped both to conceal this and, when it was discovered, to emphasise it. He had a very beautifully shaped mouth, and the carriage of his dark head was sensitive and noticeable. His nostrils were thin and fine, and he had smaller hands than his father. If he had not worn the little black moustache he would have seemed more handsome and less sleek, for his hair had a slight curl, and he did not use any kind of pomade. But the little black moustache, which in itself thrilled many of the younger

ladies in Beckwith, was a grave decorative mistake. It may have been a concession to his bearded father, or a belated survival from the days of his nascent manhood; but it was not a characteristic of his present stage of growth, and it was still regrettable.

These three Vechantors, then, sat round their own dinner-table, and were solemnly served with dinner at one of the most extraordinary moments of their common life. They did not know it was extraordinary; and were all quite unable to see that a crisis was threatening their domestic comfort; but in bringing in the coffee Rosemary, the well-tried parlour-maid at Apple House, brought also a long white envelope, which she placed before her mistress, just beside the tray bearing the coffee pot and coffee cups. This was the crisis, or at least its proximate cause.

"It's just been left, ma'am," Rosemary said in her hushed voice; and with a quick flirr of petticoats she was gone.

iii

Mrs. Vechantor, looking idly at the envelope, saw that it was addressed to herself in a handwriting unknown to her. For some moments, therefore, she did not raise it from the table; but served the coffee and affectionately watched her son dab his cigarette in the ash-tray. She always smiled in looking at him, because she could not see him sitting there, a man, without having strange, charming glimpses of him as a baby and a boy. Just as a popular monthly used to print photographs of celebrated persons at different stages of growth, so Mrs. Vechantor, much less mechanically and horribly, had these quick living portraits of her two children. And so Louis appeared to her to be still the little child she had dressed

in a scarlet pelisse, and the little boy she had known in a sailor suit, and the older boy who had come home from the local cricket- and football-fields with proud tales of great deeds performed by the men of Beckwith. He was never simply the polished young man who handled a cigarette so fastidiously. He was still her baby, a source of wondrous delights.

That was how the letter came to be overlooked for a time. It lay unheeded upon the table, a long envelope with a damp edge where the snow had caught it and melted in the warmth of the kitchen. Almost absent-mindedly Mrs. Vechantor at last, still thinking about her son and reading below his manner into memory of his experiences as a little boy, tore the envelope and extracted its contents. These proved to be two sheets of quarto paper, folded; and the communications they bore had been printed at Messrs. Platt's, the local press. They were very badly printed, and ugly, and obviously boring. For a moment Mrs. Vechantor smiled at the solemnity of the upper communication. Then, as she turned to the other one, her smile disappeared; and her eyes grew round with astonishment. It was her exclamation that first drew upon her the interested eyes of her two companions.

"Good gracious!" said Mrs. Vechantor, in a breathless voice. Perhaps she had never before, in all her life, had such an unexpected and overwhelming shock. Her eyes were fixed upon the paper which she held in her hand. She seemed altogether incredulous. "Good gracious!" she said again. "How awful!"

iv

These were the two letters which Mrs. Vechantor held in her hand, printed in small pica type upon stiff shiny

paper, with headings in the curly capital letters which are now rarely found outside the offices of local printers. The first ran:

12 High Street, Beckwith
December

Dear Madam,

Having disposed of my business I am leaving Beckwith at the end of the year after a long period in which I have enjoyed the favour of your custom. It is with great regret that I leave Beckwith, but it is my desire to devote the remaining years of my life to duties less strenuous and arduous than those of the past. In retiring from business, however, I beg to assure you of the unchanged policy of my successor, who has bought the business as it stands. I therefore solicit, on behalf of my successor, a continuance of the favour of your custom.

With compliments and grateful thanks for your consideration in the past, I am, dear Madam, Respectfully yours, James Peel

There was nothing the matter with such a letter. It was the letter of one who had prospered and earned a right to spend the rest of his days in a red-brick villa with geraniums in the front garden. It was in the supplement to Mr. Peel's letter that the astounding news was conveyed.

The second printed communication read thus:

12 High Street, Beckwith
December

Dear Madam,

In succession to Mr. James Peel. Having bought the above business I beg to solicit a continuance of your custom. The establishment will be continued upon the lines laid down by Mr. Peel in the past. The same high

quality will be maintained in every branch of the business. I trust therefore that I may receive a continuance of the patronage kindly accorded to Mr. Peel, which patronage I shall study to deserve. I shall have much pleasure in waiting upon you if desired.

With assurances of my close attention to your interests, I am, Madam, Respectfully yours,

WILLIAM VECHANTOR

As she read out this name Mrs. Vechantor could not help looking up to observe the emotional effect its pronunciation made upon her two hearers. Mr. Vechantor's face perceptibly fell. Louis's expression lightened in an amazed smile. It was the first time for years that he had been surprised. There was a moment's silence, while all three groped their way carefully back through the sparse foliage of the Vechantor family tree. Perched there, only two generations behind them, they found in that disappeared younger brother of Stephen Vechantor the answer to this riddle. The glances of Mr. and Mrs. Vechantor met in a very significant fashion as Louis said quickly:

"This must be a legacy from your shady old great-uncle, Dad. Cousin William! Of course he's a cousin! Unless it's a pseudonym! Now, why on earth should he have come to Beckwith!"

"Beckwith!" exclaimed his mother. Then she began to laugh very quietly. "Just imagine! Everybody in Beckwith must have read these circulars just as we've been doing it! What a sensation it will be for them! It will be like warning fires!"

Mr. Vechantor rose violently from his chair and stood by the table, smoothing his moustaches away from his mouth. Such an action showed that he was unusually

excited. Before speaking, however, he sat down again and impatiently pushed away his napkin.

"It's very serious," he said. "It's very unfortunate. It's disastrous."

Louis drew down his mouth in a comical grimace and glanced mischievously sideways at the perplexed face of his mother.

"You'll have an influx of callers to-morrow," he suggested dryly. "And I know who'll be the first among them all. Miss Lampe." He even glanced at the clock, wondering if she would be able to resist the impulse to run out in her goloshes that same evening.

"Yes, but don't you see," interrupted Mr. Vechantor, rather passionately. "This isn't the end of it. It's not a thing to smile over and dismiss. There's more to come. There's no end to what it may lead to!"

They all looked at each other, in some consternation

CHAPTER III: LOUIS

i

THEY continued to sit at the dinner-table, as if petrified, all eyes upon the two badly-printed circulars which had disturbed their tranquillity. The clock upon the mantelpiece ticked gently, the fire murmured and huskily rearranged its formations. And across the dazzling tablecloth the Vechantors were realising the monstrous news. Mr. Vechantor was frowning; his long hands made nervous movements. Mrs. Vechantor fingered the edge of her saucer. Louis, his eyes contracted, and a little whimsical nick or perpendicular crease showing in his clear forehead, studied his charring cigarette, from which a faint drift of blue smoke was trailing away into nothing. Mr. Vechantor was easily, of the three, the most discomposed. He was genuinely distressed. It made him impatient. It made him exclaim.

"Tchah!" said he, fidgeting. "Tut tut tut." He clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Again he muttered: "Disastrous."

"It's rather awful," agreed his wife. "What *ever* shall we do!" They both relapsed into gloom. The shadow of Beckwith was upon them. There was silence.

"I really don't think it's as bad as all that," Louis said, after a long pause. "I mean, it doesn't concern us. People like Miss Lampe will gape and nudge and gobble for a week or two; and after that perhaps

strangers coming across the name may be curious. But it's over then. An anomaly; but not a fatal thing at all. Not even like a forgery. It's nothing at all. At least, if our name were Smith—or even Bannerman, or Campbell—it would be nothing at all."

His father looked impatiently at him, not weighing the argument.

"That's perfectly true," he said. "Perfectly. But it's got nothing to do with it. Our name is neither Smith nor Campbell. It's Vechantor. It's a peculiar name. No, no; I'm afraid it's going to be a difficulty. We're not in London. It would matter less in a city. You see, they're obviously cousins of ours. There's no getting away from that—however you may try to blink the fact."

"I'm not——" began Louis, surprised.

"Remember, Louis," added his mother. "The relationship is close. If they were anywhere else but on our doorstep. . . . But it is so dreadful to order your groceries from a cousin, to owe him money . . ."

"There's no need to do *that*," hastily remarked Mr. Vechantor, moved by his irritation. "I don't think we need study such a possibility." Mrs. Vechantor smiled at his rapidity in misunderstanding her remark.

"And most people would be glad to have a cousin in the provision trade," Louis said. "It would be such a convenience in case of a food-shortage. That's a very small matter. It isn't as though we were aristocrats."

Mr. Vechantor winced. He had always been sorry that his grandfather had started life in the tea trade, although until now he had never been ashamed of it. Until now there had been no present circumstance to prevent him from smiling grimly at the memory. Mrs. Vechantor was also displeased at the apparent flippancy of Louis's remark and its plain suggestion.

"This is what I'm thinking," she said steadily. "If a cousin of ours came to Beckwith—just to live—I should be overjoyed; because I miss the satisfaction that your own kin can give. I should immediately call upon her and do all I could to help her. All my friends would call upon her. Everybody, for our sake, would know her, do you see; and without any of the bother of building up acquaintance she would take her place in the town."

Louis gave a little scornful laugh.

"That might be a reason for *not* coming to Beckwith," he dryly suggested.

"For a misanthropical person, yes; but don't you see . . . I don't want to be a snob. I hope I'm not one . . . though one can never tell, of course. But this is my quandary. If I *don't* call on our cousins I shan't be able to forgive myself; and if I *do* call on the new grocer's family I shall very likely throw the town into a state of social anarchy. All the desirable boundaries will be upset . . ." Mrs. Vechantor was quietly smiling as she said this, and of course her listeners did not take seriously the account she gave of her perplexities. But she may have spoken truly, so far as the effect on Beckwith was concerned.

"Would that matter? Jolly good job to upset the cliques," said Louis. This saying exasperated his already impatient father.

"Nonsense. Nonsense," said Mr. Vechantor. "One must respect the *convenances.*"

"You *can't* think it matters, Dad!"

"Not in a large sense. To us, and to Beckwith, it matters a great deal. It's not as though we were even a five-hundred a year family . . ." Mr. Vechantor was really excited. "We must think of our position in the town. You can't abdicate thoughtlessly . . ."

"Oh, we're monarchs!" Louis was again scornful.

"Think of the grocer himself. He probably wants to stick to his business—to make money. If our account's big enough he won't worry about a name. After all, he's come to Beckwith as a grocer, not as our cousin. The only communication we've had from him is a circular asking for our custom. Why be so dreadfully self-conscious about it? If he were a grocer at Sevenoaks we shouldn't bother about him. He's nothing to us. He never has been anything. Just because he's dropped from the clouds! It's too absurd! Why not take the whole thing—it's the only practical way—as people of the world? Recognise the difference of social position, or ignore Beckwith altogether and take him to our bosoms?"

Mr. Vechantor started up. He could no longer keep still. The discussion had become intolerable.

"We'll go into the drawing-room," he said. "I find this sort of talk more than I can bear." He led the way across the wide hall, and stood moodily looking down into the fire. The glances he shot at Louis were filled with repulsion. All his movements were sudden and convulsive with nervous irritation. But some dim sense of this hostility only chilled Louis's imagination and forced him back upon a kind of arid, obstinate development of his theme.

"If you reverse the positions," he continued. "Take it from his side. Say I've come into a district to make money, and I find a family with my name occupying a fairly prominent position in the town——"

"Fairly prominent!" exclaimed Mr. Vechantor. "That's a curious phrase."

Louis proceeded in a rather constrained voice, ignoring his father's objection:

"If I were in . . . my cousin's place," he said coolly, "I should laugh; but I should want to stick to my last.

I shouldn't want anything to do with him. I should feel proud of my independence; and down with power and privilege! If he or his wife came to see me—assuming I were the shop-keeper—I should certainly resent his patronage. I should very likely insult him."

"He's probably got a wife," urged Mrs. Vechantor. "It's she who is the difficulty."

"Why? If you run into her you can be quite amiable."

"I'm afraid I'm thinking of Beckwith," said Mrs. Vechantor frankly. "I don't want Beckwith to judge me wrongly. It's not a thing I generally consider, I admit; but I want to do what is best—for these other Vechantors and for ourselves. And at the moment I can't see what that is."

"Beckwith!" said Louis. "What a tyranny the place is! Ignore it. Ignore the grocer. Ignore everything; but don't put yourself about, mother dear."

Mr. Vechantor, less superficially impatient than he had been, was plunged in gloom.

"Louis sees it all as a modern young man—half a snob, half a Socialist," he at last pronounced in a melancholy voice. "That's really the whole difficulty with him." It was an unexpected frontal attack.

"Socialist!" exclaimed Louis incredulously. "Snob!"

"That's what they taught you to be at Oxford, isn't it? Isn't that the curriculum? Intellectual and ethical snobbery? A sort of logic-chopping pseudo-Socialism?" Mr. Vechantor continued to speak rather fiercely in presence of his amazed hearers. "Religiosity, of course, and the worship of emotionalism—one understands and expects that from Oxford; but this sort of shallow democratic snobbery. . . . It's neither one thing nor the other —this modern poison in our young men."

Louis was deeply moved. His faced had sharpened and paled.

"Really, Dad . . ." he began. "I'd no idea of this cleavage between us."

"There's no cleavage, dear," Mrs. Vechantor interrupted, looking with surprised entreaty at her husband. He, with his face now warmly coloured, and his eyes angry and suffused, replied to this glance.

"I think Louis wants waking up," he said quickly. "I've been thinking it for some time. This evening's talk points the need of it. Louis thinks, as all clever young men do, that by talking in generalisations you can avert the plain issue of facts. His talk is full of terms such as 'Oligarchy,' 'Plutocracy,' 'Mediævalism,' 'Labour,' and so on, which he's picked up at Oxford because that's the terminology of his set. He's got no conception of realities at all—only of terms. His pseudo-Socialism —a sort of sterile intellectualism—is shown in his wish to ignore the difficulty here. His Romanticism is shown in his belief that you can ignore the society you live in. All that is taught at Oxford, where the State is worshipped and the commonweal overlooked. He accepts his cousin as his cousin—theoretically; but he accepts the provision-dealer as a provision-dealer—practically. The two things don't conflict in his mind because his mind is a mind of conceptions—not of realities. He's faithful to his training in thinking that by stating a relation you can shirk the need for dealing with it."

"My word, Dad! There's some fine confused thinking there!" said Louis, with a rather superior manner. He was terribly hurt; his hands were trembling, and his lips were set in the smile of one who has failed and is too proud to show his despair. His father's unexpected and undignified tirade had wounded his pride. It was with a painful effort that he sought still to control his

voice. "I thought I was talking horse sense—neither emotionalism nor intellectualism. I really don't understand you. Mother's only afraid of the Lampes and the Calumnies—not of any decent Beckwithians, like that nice little Toppett woman. I wasn't laying down a general law. Though I do think, I admit, that general laws can be stated—I mean, I don't understand your dislike of general propositions, so long as they're not the usual Oxford tosh . . ."

"Yes . . . It's I who am being the weak person," Mrs. Vechantor said apologetically, overwhelmed by this sudden irruption of temperament on the part of her menfolk. "I shall find a way. Of course I shall find one."

"Not by means," said her husband, "of Louis's elucidations." He was clouded. His colour had gone down. A quick angry shame had risen in his heart. He was ashamed of himself because he had offended his own taste. He had been cantankerous; and he wished he had not been so. But his hostility to Louis remained. Louis, bereft of his coolness by the passionate emotion lying deep and burning in his indignant heart, blundered on, trying with a boy's obstinate pride not to show his hurt.

"You see, mother's thinking that as a woman, and as a cousin, she wants to do all she can for . . . cousin William's wife . . ."

Every time Louis said, with a kind of bravado that was offensive to his parents, the name "cousin William," both his father and his mother winced. He continued:

"But with a grocer's wife she has to face all sorts of impertinences from every side. That's why I say: 'Do nothing.' As for my snobbery—we're all three of us snobs this evening; but that's because this has taken us by surprise. Individually we could manage it all right. I'm sure we could—each one of us! Even Dad! As I've said: there's no real difficulty. Mother simply has

to make up her mind that these Vechantors are here in quality of grocers; and their social or family relationships don't arise. There's neither Socialism nor religiosity in that, as far as I can see." He was still trembling, and his voice warmed and quivered as he deliberately steered once more into the zone of danger.

"There's the vicious separation of constituents," grumbled his father awkwardly. "I never said you were a sentimentalist. That you've been saved from, I hope. But you think that by analysing a difficulty you have solved it."

"Oh, that's Cambridge; not Oxford," Louis could not resist saying.

"It's common to educated young men," retorted his father. "Your mother sees that William Vechantor is a man before he's a Vechantor or a grocer. That's what you believe your own discovery to be. But she sees also that in all probability he and his wife will have great difficulties when they move into a new country district."

"They'd have exactly the same difficulties if their name was Jones," obstinately said Louis.

"Quite so. But if their name were Jones they wouldn't be our cousins."

"Well, that's sentimentality!" Louis exclaimed. "If ever anything was!"

"Not at all. *Noblesse oblige.*"

Mrs. Vechantor shook her pretty old head reprovingly at them, dreading another combat.

"I don't think either of you is coming very well out of this squabbling," she said gently. "You'd far better give it up. I think, Emanuel, that you're in the wrong, because you attacked Louis. Besides, you're the elder."

Emanuel turned sharply to his son, shooting that dark glance at him from beneath sullen brows.

"Very well," he said. "We'll discuss your shortcomings at another time." And he seated himself at last by the fire and picked up the evening paper that had been warming there. As he read there was heard from him, from time to time, so that they knew the problem still to be working in his mind, a sharp sigh that once or twice developed into a yawn.

ii

At last it was night. The long evening in the warm drawing-room was at an end. Louis was free to be alone. He was left there when the others went to bed, standing by the fire and looking at his rather strikingly-embroidered slippers. His attitude then was one of perfect nonchalance, which deceived his parents; but it changed as soon as they were gone. He followed them almost immediately, going to his own bedroom upon the first floor. From the window he could see that the snowfall had ceased. The garden lay before him buried in white. Above, seeming very near, was a lowering opacity of blue-black cloud. Across open ground a strong wind blew, shaking little tufts and douches of snow from the arms of the trees. There was no light except the reflection from his own room as he drew up the blind and looked out of the window. All in Beckwith was sleeping or was behind closed doors. There was no sound but the faint whir of the seeking wind, and sometimes a fluttering thud as the wind overthrew a large deposit of snow. The scene had a strange beauty, without comfort or tenderness. It chilled him.

Yet his heart was burning, passionate ejaculations were framing themselves in his mind and upon his tongue. Turning quickly from the window he went to stand moodily by the fire, smoking cigarette after ciga-

rette in a vague state of revolt. His father's biting words had been hard enough to bear, because they shattered the fabric of his own self-respect; but still harder was the fact that these words were the expression of thoughts long held. That was what hurt!

Louis at the age of twenty-six could look back upon a very contented and uneventful life. He had never been, physically, very strong; and although he had never shirked games and boy friends he had never been very adventurous. The house, the garden, his lessons, his after-reading, had filled his days and developed his love of home. He had not been to a public-school; but at nineteen he had been sent to Oxford, where he made a number of not very permanent friendships, fell into and out of successive fashions in talk and mental attitude, took his degree, and spent his time with a kind of careless happiness. He had not to think of future career, because it was inevitable that he should take his place in his father's business. So he had written a few poems, collected a few prints, read the works of a good many modern authors, and dabbled pleasantly in whatever attracted him. Since his entry into the business three years before, Louis had continued to dabble in political literature and in general literature. He could give reasons for liking or disliking a picture or a poem, went to the theatre (where he preferred to see plays with some literary interest), talked a good deal with such of his surviving Oxford acquaintances as fell in his path, observed rather acutely, and continued to be without ambition. At home he talked little. He was a different young man altogether. In Beckwith he was quiet, and was considered by the young persons of the district to be "deep." And as he was thoughtful, but not introspective, he knew very little about himself.

Suddenly to be called a parrot, therefore, and the

product of successive environments, was the greatest shock he could have had. The blow had come from an unexpected hand. He had thought that no understanding could be more perfect than that existing between his father and himself. That had been proved to be a false idea, and he had the feeling of being lost. For a time he was quite bewildered, aching with the sense of failure.

Louis began slowly to realise the true sources of his father's exasperation. His father was a solid Conservative, disbelieving in political aims, supporting the local Conservative member but all the time knowing that when a man gets to the club at Westminster its pervasive warmth reconciles all differences of belief. His father, in fact, was at his age essentially a Pyrrhonist. He believed in nothing at all. He had come to regard as important only his own status in Beckwith, because that flattered his vanity. He was as contemptuous of Beckwith as anybody could have been; but he prized the respect to which he was accustomed. While he despised them, he conformed with rigid punctiliousness to Beckwith's standards of behaviour. Louis saw that clearly at last.

Had Louis been so agnostic as to view all things with unconcern, excepting only this one question of local status, he would, he felt, have commended himself wholly to his father. Instead, he had learnt to prize certain principles, with all the naïve velocity of youth. That readiness for illusion irritated his father. It struck him, evidently, as callow, enthusiastic. He despised it. The very silences in which Louis had buried his ideals had given offence, as indicating stubbornness and fanaticism. Louis's blood stirred. Again and again he came round to a fresh recognition of the real nature of the shock he had received—the understanding for the first time in his life that his father was a completely different person

from himself. A less fine and perceptive person than he had believed. He had felt such perfect trust and such a candid love and admiration for this older man with more than his own comprehension. And now he saw that his father, like any other commonplace critic, busily adding this little piece of ingenuousness or disingenuousness to that, always at face value, had misread his whole character. Where Louis had counted upon his father's love and understanding as a solvent he now felt that there had been all the time only cold point-to-point criticism—the criticism of a shrewd but unperceptive spirit. It was a blow.

The loneliness that seized Louis at this moment was terrible. He was shaken and mortified. Wherever he turned he saw at this moment only stupid misunderstanding. In all Beckwith there was not a man or a woman to whom he could confide his present chagrin and thereby obtain relief. In all England, he felt. That quick realisation, which all very sensitive men and women feel intermittently throughout their lives, had an extraordinary effect upon Louis's whole attitude to his neighbours. The kindness, which perhaps was only indifference, that he had hitherto felt for those surrounding him, was suddenly and passionately destroyed. Hatred, bizarre and without measure, sprang up in his heart for Beckwith and for all it represented in his life. It was a dreadful moment of realisation, of change. A deep sigh shook Louis. He closed his eyes. His face was white and strained. Hereafter he would feel differently. Never, never would he again feel as he had felt until this evening.

"Oh God!" he cried. "What a fool . . . what a *fool* I've been not to see it before!"

Ashamed of having been carried to such vehemence, he shrugged his shoulders, stooping and knocking at the

log that burned upon his fire. Dull, heavy sparks flew; and the log's nest was quite black. It was past one o'clock. He was very pale, and was trembling slightly; but his mouth was firmly closed.

CHAPTER IV: THE PARTY

i

IN the morning Louis slept late. He had slept like a stone, and he awoke unrefreshed; for the nervous strain of his suppressed rage and its sequel of embittered dismay had exhausted him as nothing else could have done. Upon arising, he felt heavy and stifled; for a thaw had set in and the morning was humid. From his window he saw the sunken black spots in the melting snow, the trees clear of whiteness, the hedges and bushes dingy. With burning eyes he gazed upon the scene, finding it repulsive. It intensified his mood of disquiet. He was glad he would not see his father at breakfast. Such a meeting, such a journey as they made together once a week, would have been a further distress. Louis was morbid with his distaste, hating everything.

From breakfast he hurried to catch his train, his feet slushing through the snow, and leaving as a track sodden impressions of his boots. There seemed to be no wind, but only a soft, shivering humidity in the air—neither cold nor warm. As he ran down the path to the station his train was coming in, grinding and rumbling over the low bridge across the road; and he was glad to take advantage of this fact and avoid his customary fellow-travellers. Nevertheless, once he was in the train his unhappiness continued, for the surprise of his father's criticism had been too great to pass off in a

night or to be distracted by newspaper headlines, however ingenious.

Louis turned and looked out of the window. While his thoughts had been busy the train had neared the outskirts of London. Already it was trundling past the familiar districts, ugly and melancholy, overhung with a drab snow-mist, saturated with the melted snow, and miserable with its general disastrous air of porous bricks and leaky drain-pipes. It made a lamentable background for his own harassed recollections. It drove them in. He began to feel the first slow gropings of a headache. His burning lids dropped in long stupefying reliefs over his eyes.

And all for a few words! Yes; but words that brought, an unpleasant awakening and made a difference to his whole life, because they awoke new impulses and new recognitions within him. Louis did not seem to the clerks at his office to be an older man than the Louis they had seen the night before. They bobbed up at his arrival, signalling to each other with jerked heads the fact that he was there, called "Good morning," and fell back to their work like so many mechanical toys. They would only have noticed a violent change in his outward appearance; and there was no sign of that, although Louis to himself felt aged by immeasurable time. Seeing them so clearly the same as usual, so unremarking of the crisis which had occurred in his own life, Louis had a curious thought. It came to him to think, "I suppose I look the same. I suppose I *am* the same, though I feel so different. How entirely unknown they are to me. Between last night and this morning any of them might have forged a name, or seduced a girl, or killed somebody. . . . And nobody here could tell. We should never hear of it until long afterwards. There's nothing

to judge by. . . . How little one really knows about people one sees like this every day!"

He felt a stranger to all men, solitary within himself.

ii

That mood lasted several days—the mood of rather morbid self-discovery;—but it grew weaker as nature reasserted itself. Louis was not built to continue for long in such a state of mind. But he did change inwardly thenceforward. He was quite right in thinking that he would never again be as he had been before; but the awakening had been salutary. His manner had always been reserved; and there was no outward change. But for a time he was much more emotional than he had been —inwardly emotional and outwardly ironic. He was more ironic, more observant, less juvenile; and was yet sometimes quickly moved by things which earlier would have left him merely interested. He became impatient; but his perception constrained his impatience, and it therefore was rarely seen.

Only his mother saw the change, and saw the sudden exasperations, without linking them on to the scene with his father. She had thought that a passing disagreement and had not been a witness of Louis's suffering. During the days preceding Christmas she noticed this impatience of his, and anxiously observed his colour rise and ebb at passing difficulties. She understood very swiftly that he was in an abnormal state; but with all her sympathy she went astray in her interpretation; so that, instead of learning the truth by a memory of that peculiar evening, she cast little glances among the three Hughes girls who had walked across the common on the afternoon of Boxing-day to ask Louis to come to tea, to their party. That was why Mrs. Vechantor went wrong in her read-

ing of the situation. She looked at Adela Hughes and Judith Hughes and Veronica Hughes, and she thought all of them so attractive that Louis's slight air of embarrassment might have been due to a cause generally reckoned with in youthful distempers.

Mrs. Vechantor hoped it might be Veronica Hughes. She preferred Veronica, who was very fair and very dainty, and who looked delightful in her fur cap and short fur coat. There was a lovely dainty flush upon her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled and her teeth glistened as she spoke. She was altogether charming. From Veronica Mrs. Vechantor turned to Judith, who, like her father, was dark. Judith's were those polished chocolate brown eyes which are hard to read; and Mrs. Vechantor was not wholly at ease with her because she thought Judith possibly rather secretive. She thought Judith might be a girl to have clandestine meetings with an unsuitable young man, or to read those books by Havelock Ellis which are generally ignored in Beckwith. There remained Adela, who was as fair as Veronica, but less piquante: Veronica had round dimpling cheeks; but Adela was thin in face, more dignified, rather older (for Veronica was the youngest). Mrs. Vechantor would have preferred Adela to Judith; for Adela had a very pretty laugh, and seemed extremely candid and without artifice. Such was Mrs. Vechantor's first thought of these three girls. She began hereafter to observe them more narrowly. She looked from one to the other, now, trying to fathom the depths of each. It was impossible. Each had the Beckwithian air of jovial frankness with young males, a kind of modern camaraderie that deceives only the very elderly woman, and sometimes doesn't even succeed with her. They presented an unreadable front now to Mrs. Vechantor. All were more vivacious in

Louis's presence; not one of them seemed more than the others to attract him or to wish to do so. They all laughed and chattered and teased him in a sort of pretty boyishness that was always a long distance from over-familiarity, and that was warranted by a long acquaintance dating from days of childhood. It was as though they acted together, with a corporate interest in him.

Could she be wrong? Mrs. Vechantor asked herself. "Dear me!" she thought. "How unlike girls are nowadays to what they were. It's as if they . . . And yet it's quite impossible that they should really do that . . ." She put aside an unpleasant thought. Surely they only led a different, a physically more healthy, kind of life. The convention was different. Perhaps, thought Mrs. Vechantor, girls didn't trust women as they used to do. That brought her round again to the uncomfortable thought which she had dismissed earlier. She felt that perhaps the exercise, in hardening the body, might possibly have hardened the soul. To her—for she would not pursue her doubt to the uncomfortable end from which she had shied—to her, then, it came to make a remark that Louis had made a week earlier. "How mysterious people are!" she thought timidly. "How hard it is nowadays to get past that . . ." The horrible word flashed into her mind again. It seemed to her that the three Hughes girls, in shaking hands with her as they carried Louis off with them, all offered the same curious hard inner surface. In their eyes she read lively pleasure, and triumph; and then that common, universal "something" which she did not dare to define even to herself.

When they had gone, and Mrs. Vechantor had heard the gate shut behind them, she sat still in her chair, smiling with pleasure at the gaiety of their visit, and her pleasure in the change for Louis. And then, gradually, a little

chill began to spread through her; and she felt vaguely unhappy.

"I'm an absurd old thing," she said to herself. "Shamefully absurd, and contemptibly old-fashioned and sentimental." She moved again, and sat nearer the fire. The old clock chimed its beautiful silvery "ting" for half-past three; and Mrs. Vechantor sat looking into the red glow. Her face had grown serious. She was thinking intently. "I can't keep him always," she was thinking. "And I shouldn't want to. I want to see him happy. If he were happy I shouldn't mind *who* his wife was. But I wish . . ." For a time she was lost in reveries. All sorts of memories and hopes came and went like little Spring airs as she sat listening to the subdued cracking and whispering of the fire. The fire seemed to tell her so much, like a busy, rapid, inexhaustible book of thoughts and echoes. It told her of her own childhood, and of her marriage; it told her of Louis from his earliest days. The memories brought the tears to her eyes. They were so many, so crowded, so sweet to con over in her hours of solitude. And the fire helped Mrs. Vechantor to recall the three girls in whose company Louis was now crossing the common. It was as though, sitting here in the fire's hushing, she could see those three faces at leisure, and look deep into those mystifying eyes. And she turned from each in turn, puzzled and vaguely unhappy, back to the others, to and fro among the three sisters. The fire whispered on, and Mrs. Vechantor's memories and far-flung wonderings continued. A fear had clutched her heart, a fear that was born of this renewed contemplation of the three faces. Mrs. Vechantor tremblingly raised her handkerchief to her eyes, and tried to smile to herself. "I do so hope he'll be happy . . . my dearie . . ." she thought; not framing the words, but hearing them, it seemed, in the movement of the fire's

steady consumption. "If only I could be sure about them . . . about *one* of them. But all . . . all the same!" She couldn't bear the thought. In each pair of eyes, down below the emotion of the moment, it seemed to her that she came to impassable places; not reserves, not the lovely shrinking shynesses that she would so have adored; but something she could not bear to think of in association with Louis. The dreadful word recurred to her. "If only there didn't seem something . . . I don't like to call it . . . *watchful* . . . rather *calculating!*" cried the unhappy woman aloud. "In all of them. Coldly watching, and shrewd . . . Oh, if I could only read down deep into hearts!" she thought. "What I'd give!"

She was shaken by a sudden spasm of hatred for the three girls. Especially she hated Veronica, whose smile had become, in memory, so fixed that the bright eyes seemed bright with hardness.

iii

As they went across the common, already misty at the farther edge in the premature dusk of a winter afternoon, Louis had Veronica upon his left and Adela upon his right. Judith was farther away, upon the other side of Adela, seeming to walk by herself, although she was turned towards the others and threw a word into the conversation from time to time. With such a bevy Louis could hardly have failed to show vivacity, to forget entirely the gnawing pride and discontent in his bosom. He looked from one pretty smiling face to the other, and was as cheerful as they.

"It's really a great score for us," Veronica said, "to be bringing you home like this. We were afraid our party would be very dull, because our cousins, the Verulam-

Pinks, had sent us word this morning that they all had the mumps, and couldn't come."

"Isn't it a dreadful thing to have . . ." Adela was saying; when Judith added:

"At Christmas-time, especially."

"I've no doubt they deserved it," Veronica continued.

"Oh, Vera!" protested Adela. "That's too bad!"

"No; really, I expect they've been eating too much, or something. What is it causes mumps, I wonder? D'you know, Louis?" He didn't. Judith supplied a sort of information.

"It's generally infection, my child."

"They haven't been *near* us!" Adela hastened to assure Louis. "I mean, there's no danger from us. We're quite free from any tendency to mumps. Aren't we, Judy?"

"Yes; it doesn't spread to cousins. However, *they've* all got it, right enough."

"Of course, it may not be true at all. Perhaps they didn't want to come!" Veronica gaily said. "There's always that sort of thing in families. I mean, cousins. They *always* hate each other. Have you noticed?"

"Oh, Vera!" protested Adela. "You *are* a beast! They're really most awfully nice people, Louis, and they're frightfully fond of coming over to see us. Haven't you ever seen them? They're all a sort of sandy colour. But you see they couldn't very well come and give our party the mumps. It wouldn't be fair."

"Still, you'll admit," added Judith, following up the malign suggestion of her younger sister, "it's rather peculiar that they should all have it at the same time. These things generally take a day or two to get about, don't they? I must say I think it's a bit suspicious . . . happening so suddenly!"

"It depends on who your visitors are," Louis said gently, as he was wondering himself.

"Well: there's . . . Who shall we tell him first?" They consulted each other, laughing, with raised brows, and framed initials. "Well, there's Alice Deadwood. She's home for Christmas, so we had to ask her. D'you like her?"

"Oh!" interrupted Judith, before Louis could commit himself to a liking, and while he was trying to recall Alice Deadwood. "She's so stuck up. She thinks nobody's good enough for her. She interrupts you all the time with——" Her voice trailed off, apparently at some warning glance.

"Judy!" cried Adela. "Don't be beastly!"

"I hardly know her," Louis remarked, having completed the ransacking of his memory. "You don't seem to have begun very well."

"Well: and then there's the Daunton boy . . ."

"But he's been doing someth——" Again Judith was apparently checked. She broke into a laugh. They all began to walk with a more rapid, more virtuous, step across the darkening common. "Well," Judith added defiantly. "So he has!"

"I think you're perfectly disgusting, Judy," Veronica said, a little steely glint in her bright eyes which Louis did not notice. "He's done nothing bad. Only weak and silly."

"No," added Adela. "He's been caught by somebody. Somebody not nice."

"I hadn't heard of that," Louis remarked interestedly.

"It's not nice," Veronica said. "You oughtn't to talk about it."

"Ph! He's only a kid," Judith put in. "Some girl in a tea-place or an office has made him propose to her. That's all it is, Louis. Only Vera's such a little prig."

"You know I'm not!" Veronica's teeth closed with a snap.

"But that's most awfully fascinating," Louis said.

"It's hardly a thing to talk about." Adela held her head virtuously high. "Oh, but it's *too* funny to hear mother and Mrs. Daunton talking about it. You see, she found a letter from this girl . . ."

"Full of swarmy sentiment!" Judith interpolated.

"Saying . . . what was it? Awfully funny! Saying nobody had ever loved her before, and he was all her whole soul. Eric Daunton! Fancy telling a boy that!"

"Perhaps it was true!" Louis felt suddenly indignant. A little hot fire shot through him at Adela's tone of contempt for such candour. There was an amazed protest.

"True!" cried Adela. "Not with a girl of *that* sort. Of course, you wouldn't understand. That's the way men get caught. A waitress, I think she was . . . or in a sh . . . I forget what she was. But just fancy what an absurd thing to *say*. That nobody had ever . . . cared for her. . . ."

"Tell me, why absurd?" begged Louis.

The girls exchanged glances of amused pity for his ignorance. To them it was quite altogether too ridiculous. They seemed curiously robust, experienced, mature in the nuances of sex relationship. In Beckwith unmarried girls know that there are things men should not know about them. One of these things is the extent of their personal experience of love, and lovers. Louis wondered if he would ever be so consumedly wise in affairs as they. How could he have been? He was not a woman, judging another woman in the light of an established Beckwith convention. To him it was not disgraceful to admit that one has not been loved before, that one is ignorant of the implications of love.

"My poor lad!" Veronica said, in a pitying voice of sententiousness. "You don't seem to understand these things. It's not to be expected. You're only a boy.

But it's not a nice subject, and we'd better go on with our tale. Well, then, there's Mabel and Sydney Dumaresque. You know them. Mabel's a very nice girl . . ."

"She's not very pretty, is she?" objected Louis, rather grumblingly.

"She's-a-*dear*!" said the three Hughes girls in one voice of passionate loyalty to the unprepossessing despised. Then Judith added candidly: "Of course, she *has* got rather protruding teeth."

Veronica resumed:

"And then there's your friend Miss Lampe." Louis stopped dead. "What's the matter?" he was asked.

"Miss Lampe!" he cried confusedly. Then, recovering himself, and blustering: "Isn't she enough to make a man pull up suddenly?"

"I don't know what you mean!" Adela protested. "I suppose you think it's clever! She's most *awfully* good-natured . . ." As Louis remained silent under this preposterous claim, Adela hurried on. "And little Irene Corntoft. She's only sixteen; but she's a perfect darling, and she plays like an angel on the clarinet."

"But what a horrible instrument for an angel to choose," Louis whispered. "I thought they had harps." He was ignored.

"And Mrs. Callum," pursued Adela.

"As *well* as Miss Lampe?" gasped Louis, with a shiver. "Of course I *know* she's a most wonderfully sweet-natured person."

"Isn't he perfectly dreadful!" they said. Adela added: "He's so *critical*." That is in Beckwith a very deadly thing to say about anybody. It is like saying that he is a vegetarian.

"Oh, I don't know," explained Veronica. "They really *are* a pair of old cats, you know." She was quite

marvellously frank, because she knew that there could be no harm in admitting before Louis a thing that everybody in Beckwith secretly knew.

"Oh, Vera!" Adela cried. "Upon my word!" Adela was upon an altogether different tack. Her rôle in the Hughes family was that of the kind eldest sister, very sweet and gentle, who never said a thoughtlessly bitter thing. Beckwith ladies said: "Adela's so gentle: one never hears her say an unkind thing." It had become her private vanity: she went to monstrous lengths to retain such saintly repute.

Veronica laughed—a lovely trilling laugh that seemed to turn Adela's rebuke into something naïvely ridiculous. The sound of her laugh shot through and through Louis, as unexpected music, at night, across water, might have done. His lips parted in the darkness.

They all appeared thoroughly to have enjoyed their walk across the common to the Hughes's home; and they tramped into the house in boisterous high-spirits. Without taking off her hat and coat, Veronica went into the drawing-room, crying: "He's come! We've brought him!"

Mrs. Hughes hurried to greet Louis—a stout lady with a florid face, her gown a purple silk which made one sightless after a moment's paralysed contemplation. She welcomed Louis with a raised forefinger of rebuke.

"*Such* a stranger!" she exclaimed, laughing a hearty clucking laugh which came only from the throat. "Where *have* you been hiding all this time? It's too bad of you! Really it is!" With a lowered voice, still holding his hand, she went on: "Here's Vera been wondering what's come to you after all this long time! No music, no talk! We've missed you. I do so wish you'd come over more often. . . ."

iv

The drawing-room, as Louis entered, was half-full of Beckwithians of various ages. It was a characteristic gathering. Behind, with deep cuffs showing, were the older men, friends of Mr. Hughes or friends of the family, grave or rubicund men, for the most part of middle-age. Grouped about the room were the more individualised guests—Mrs. Callum, and Miss Lampe, and the Dumaresques, the Dauntons, little Irene Corntoft, and so on. Louis gave a swift glance round the room. All eyes were upon him, and he had a rather grim pleasure in thinking that he heard Miss Lampe smother the word "shop-keeper" as he passed the open door. There was no doubt in his mind that the advent of this party of four, walking sturdily across the common, had been recorded; and that the sight of himself had led to a hurried re-canvassing of the Vechantor sensation among those present. Standing there in the centre of all these figures, well-groomed and debonair, he gratified their sight and moved them all to a higher kind of pleasure. They saw in him the embodiment of all that was most distinguished in Beckwith social circles. All of them acknowledged the Vechantors.

After the record given by the Hughes girls the actual party gave him no surprises. He singled out Mrs. Callum, a rather thin woman of fifty-five, a widow, who wore spectacles and seemed always upon the verge of committing herself to a calculated indiscretion. She was very angular, with a severe face, and she had a way of saying in a harsh, swan-like voice: "I'm afraid I've . . . said more than I ought." It generally happened that she spoke truly, and her tongue was a good deal feared. She had a most unpleasant trick of seeing everything—from

a blush to a cracked cup that any hostess might keep to herself behind the tea-cosy. She was in the habit of saying: "There's not much that escapes my eye." She was, Louis thought, a most unpleasant woman. He had never by any chance heard her say a kind word, without qualification, about anybody.

Next to Mrs. Callum sat Miss Lampe, in her black poplin dress, wearing a thin gold chain and a black and white cameo brooch. She was very small, and wrinkled, with close-pursed lips and eyes like boot-buttons which had caught the sun. She and Mrs. Callum were true cronies. They knew together, in secret (and not always, unfortunately, in secret), all about everybody in Beckwith. They were always together, great tea-drinkers and gossips, and their interest was insatiable. They constantly turned to each other, seeing the same things, and marking them as one marks linen, with a little hot pressure to bring out the full significance of the lettering. That was the way they managed to miss nothing that went on, for they never were overcome by a babble of voices, but kept their heads and their nerve in every circumstance.

Behind them, at a distance, talking to an ugly girl with protruding teeth, was a young man of about five-and-twenty, rather boyish-looking, with a white face and a furtive look. This was Eric Daunton, who had committed an indiscretion in falling wrongly in love. Louis looked at him with a new interest, and was pleased with his appearance, but not with his manner. Daunton had a high brow, and a good face; but his eyes were guilty, and his mouth petulant. He looked as if he might be easily "rattled," and his moody expression made Louis shake his head. Poor devil! He'd been having a rough time, and his nerve was going. He looked as though he were all the time swearing under his breath.

Young Dumaresque was a very different person. He was short and stout, Jewish-looking and subtly vulgar. His tie was bright; he wore rings; his dark face, with thick features and a cast of complacency, was not at first sight attractive. He had none of Daunton's air of youngmanly pathos. Nevertheless, Louis believed him to be a good sort, and he had money, which he did not ostentatiously throw about. Daunton, Dumaresque, and Louis were the three most presentable young men in Beckwith.

Miss Deadwood and Irene Corntoft, with Mabel Dumaresque, the ugly girl with the heart of gold, completed the foreign representatives of youth at the Hughes party. Miss Deadwood was a refined-looking girl without any distinction. Irene Corntoft, a conceited little creature with a plump buff-coloured face and a short tail of disagreeable hair, was only invited on account of her virtuosity as a clarinetist, and she was trying to behave as a grown-up. She retained the attributes of childhood—greediness and bad-manners naïvely exhibited—and Louis did not care to look at her for more than a passing instant, as she made him feel rather sick.

That was the personnel of the Hughes party.

V

The Hughes girls, having hurried upstairs to throw off their out-of-door clothes, were returned by the time Louis had completed his inventory of those present; and a few minutes later everybody trooped into a much colder back room, where tea was laid out with Beckwithian sumptuousness. There was now a general rearrangement of partners. Louis, standing idly aside, and watching certain manœuvres, noticed that Daunton was unsuccessfully trying to evade Judith Hughes. Judy, the dark sister, was almost coaxingly showing him a chair beside

her own, which he at last ungraciously took. Mrs. Daunton watched the arrangement with sharp interest, and Louis saw her harsh expression give place to a motherly beam.

Dumaresque, upon the other hand, wanted, it appeared, to sit near Veronica. Louis saw this with interest; but he thought it singular that Dumaresque should be placed upon the other side of Judy and next to Irene Corntoft. Such manipulation, or such accident (as he supposed it), made his own position, when that was subtly indicated, all the more fortunate. He found himself between Adela and Veronica. He had not the least notion of the means by which this happy circumstance had been reached. All he knew was that Veronica glanced at him and then quickly at the empty chair beside herself.

Louis thought it all very strange and interesting. He was pleased to see that Miss Lampe had been engaged in the same observation as himself. "There's a lot of similarity between Miss Lampe and myself!" he thought. "How pleasant that both of us should be satisfied." But Miss Lampe's cogitations went much farther than his own. Compared with Miss Lampe, Louis was a child. He could only envy himself for good-fortune, whereas Miss Lampe was engaged in settling his destiny and calculating the matrimonial chances of his two neighbours.

Seated between two such partners, Louis forgot every part of his gloom. He was so near to them that he could turn from one delicate fair face to the other. He could see their wrists and their hands, and was physically conscious of the nearness of the two prettiest girls in the room. He was very happy, carelessly happy, as though all life was before him, as though all this were just part of a pleasant, innocent game, in which one took the chances of the moment and had no thought at all for the morrow. Working, however, in his consciousness were

subtle influences which were to show later. Adela and Veronica were wiser than he.

Across the room Judith tried vainly to thaw young Daunton by artless grace. Louis watched them at odd moments. He had no thoughts linking them in his mind. He simply looked at them as two young people at cross-purposes. He was feeling very sorry for Daunton, sitting there under the benevolent eye of Mrs. Daunton. He began to dislike Mrs. Daunton. He felt there was something sinister about her benevolence. He imagined her as an iron hand within a clumsy crimson plush glove. While he was thinking that, he seemed for a moment to lose consciousness. The tea-table chatter sounded like the confused roaring of a crowd some distance away. It was in that moment of unconsciousness that Louis saw the party with hostility. Their laughter seemed to him like the grinning of skulls. He had a horror of them. And then all the sounds once again disentangled themselves, became staccato; and he was—not a disembodied and cruel spectator—but Louis Vechantor at a party of Beckwithians.

But it had been a very odd experience, that moment of hallucination. Louis had never fainted, or he would have known that a curious sweet remoteness precedes the total loss of sensation. It was just that feeling of being apart and contemplative that had assailed him. He never again had it in the course of his life: it was a tiny aberration, like a singing in the ears, or what some mystical people have taken for a moment of spiritual revelation. Louis remembered it all his days.

vi

One inconvenience felt by several people was the presence at this party of both Louis and young Daunton. It

prevented them from discussing the two really important topics of Beckwith. So they fell back upon the Verulam-Pinks and their catastrophic mumps-attack. Everybody laughed tumultuously. All the girls felt their pretty throats. Louis had never seen so many pretty throats. He wished, though, that some of the hands had been smaller. He looked down. Adela's hands were not bad . . . Veronica's fingers were rather square-tipped. Leaning back a little he caught a glimpse of the delicate line of her cheek and throat. She really was tremendously pretty. Her blouse was pretty; and the way her hair grew and was brushed . . . Louis thought she was by far the prettiest girl there. Adela was pretty, too; but she had not the piquancy of Veronica. Her part was less shining, less radiant; she was the quieter girl, the gentle companion. While he was looking—not obtrusively—at Adela, Veronica turned to him with a perfectly gem-like smile that took his breath away. She put her head nearer, and he bent his. It gave him a curious tingling sensation to feel that their faces were so close.

"Do look at Mrs. Callum," she whispered. "Not now . . . in a minute."

He felt a faint disappointment at the fact that the message delivered by the smiling lips should have been so unromantic; but he looked. Mrs. Callum had taken a chocolate that contained a piece of nougat, and this was causing all her teeth to move about at one time in a very disconcerting manner. She could not quite close her mouth, and was publicly being punished for a piece of reckless greediness. Louis, frowning hastily, looked away; but he felt the little tremour of convulsive merriment that ran through Veronica. To her it was a clear source of amusement. It satisfied her instinctive animosity for Mrs. Callum, who had once done Veronica a bad turn over an early flirtation. It was like a piece of

justice. Louis turned quickly to Adela, who was demurely looking down at her plate. He felt sure that Adela also had observed Mrs. Callum's tragedy, and he was puzzled at her inscrutable expression. In fact both his neighbours a little perplexed him. He had no power to judge them in moods to which he was unused.

The table continued to rattle with the sound of plates and knives and spoons; and the merry voices went on and on; and at last the clock struck six. That was the sign for a return to the drawing-room. They all rose. Veronica was pressed against Louis as they went forward. Looking down, he saw again how extremely dainty she was, how long her lashes were, how the bright eyes glistened. It seemed to him that her every movement was marked with vivacity. He felt a wish that she should take his arm; but as they passed out of the door she was turned to him again, smiling mischievously and whispering "Wasn't it *awful!*" so that her shoulder was once more against his breast and her elbow for the merest instant in the hollow of his protecting hand.

vii

In the drawing-room music was instantly begun. There were some slight frownings among the three Hughes girls, who all played the piano; and at last Veronica, placing her handkerchief upon bass notes that she would never need, made an undersong for the conversation. Louis did not know what it was that she played, and it did not greatly interest him; so he watched the pianist's slender figure instead of listening with all his attention. He was glad she was so straight, even at the piano; she sat upon the piano-stool as erect as ever. Her touch was good: she had "attack." And then, when the piece was finished and voices were lowered, Veronica swung round upon the stool and looked at him with so droll

an air of mischievousness that he smiled involuntarily. The next ten minutes were given to the clarinet, with Adela accompanying.

"She's a better accompanist than I am," Veronica said to Louis.

"You don't try, perhaps," he answered, half-seriously. "You ought to."

"Well, bring some songs over one evening. . . . Will you?" asked Veronica. "It's so long since you've been."

Louis reddened faintly.

"All right," he said. "It's very nice of you." There really seemed nothing else to be done in face of so direct a request.

Veronica made no reply, but her face showed that his response, however lacking in eagerness, was acceptable and expected. He felt that she was pleased with him, and he wanted to please her now. She was not looking at Louis. She was looking at Judith, who was talking interestedly to the boy Dumaresque. A curious fixity came into Veronica's expression, something like the slightest possible frown, or air of disapproval of such a conference. She had become quieter, more thoughtful: her voice was lower, meant only for Louis.

"Have you heard about Mr. Dumaresque?" she went on, as though they had not spoken of accompaniments. "Mabel told us. He's been told he's dying. . . . A cheerful sort of thing, isn't it?"

"That chap?" Louis indicated the youth who was talking to Judith.

"No, his father. He's not here. I should think Syd Dumaresque would live for ever. I never *did* like that boy, somehow. There's something wooden about him. If you went mad he'd simply kick a hassock. He wouldn't know what to do."

Louis was pleased by the flattery of her intimate tone.

He thought, however, that the youth might have some good points, such as honesty and its kindred dulnesses, so he demurred to her implied disparagement.

"I don't know that I should know myself," he said. "So I hope you won't. . . . I thought he looked quite amiable and decent!" Then, hastening to get away from the curious topic, he proceeded. "I rather like *Daunton.*"

"Do you?" Veronica opened her eyes a little, as if in surprise, and as if it were necessary to her that his liking should be questioned. She shifted her glance to the object of his remark. They seemed very much alone now, sitting there away from the other people, while music went endlessly on at the piano. Louis, following her eyes, also contemplated Daunton, and felt pleasantly at rest sitting beside Veronica. She had a very great attractiveness for him this evening, for he had been heart-sick for days, and she was consoling him. Veronica, after this silence, returned to the subject of Daunton. "I'm sorry for him," she continued; "but he must have been an absolute idiot to get entangled with that girl."

"Have you seen her?" persisted Louis challengingly.

"Good gracious, no! You don't have to. I didn't know you were so romantic, Louis."

"I am, rather," he said.

"I can tell. Or you wouldn't be so silly. You don't know anything about life."

"I should have thought, as much as you do." He was not impatient, but his eyes hardened. She retorted.

"Girls always know more than boys . . . about life."

Louis made a little laughing sound that made her turn slightly away from him.

"They hear a lot of subterranean gossip," he suggested. "Do they know anything at all?"

"They know what you *can* do, and what you can't do. They know how easily boys can be caught."

"By other girls?"

"By girls who aren't nice girls."

"Why shouldn't this girl love Daunton? And if he wants her why shouldn't he have her?"

Veronica became rather ruffled at his persistent stupidity.

"Because . . ." she said. Then, quickly: "Oh, it doesn't matter. If you like, because I don't want him to."

A shock ran through Louis, almost imperceptibly. What did she mean? And what did his own feeling of shock mean?

"But," he proceeded, in a level tone, "it isn't any action of yours that's preventing him. . . . It's that benevolent old mother who steps in and puts a stop to it. And that's an interference with his freedom."

"You can't do what you like," Veronica said obstinately. "Nobody can. It wouldn't be good for them."

"I wish we might be allowed to try, sometimes," he ventured. "Just supposing you were wrong about that girl. Supposing she were a good girl. Supposing she'd make Daunton happy. Put yourself in her place—I mean, suppose you lived in other circumstances. . . . D'you think *your* heart wouldn't matter?"

Veronica turned back. She seemed moved to a kind of sincerity.

"D'you think we're not *all* wanting something that's not good for us?" she said thickly. "It's the wickedness of our natures. And supposing after a year he found out he'd made a mistake, that she was just pretty and stupid, or that she drank . . ."

"What I want to know," Louis said, with equal urgency, "is why one always assumes in Beckwith that girls of a slightly lower class are stupid, or dishonest, or drunken. . . . Why should we suppose that? Do you really

think Beckwith girls are all above stupidity and dishonesty?"

Veronica went white.

"It's no good talking about it," she whispered unsteadily. "You oughtn't to talk like that, anyway. If mother heard you she'd . . . Besides, it's not right to mix classes. They can't understand each other. Very likely it wouldn't be her fault, if she did drink. He'd neglect her, very likely; and go after . . . another girl."

There was a little pause. Both were ruffled, and a hostility had crept into their bearing.

"Would another girl—what you call a 'nice girl'—take him up after he'd . . . well, shall we say 'lost' this one? Would her pride allow her to take over his affection as a going concern?"

Louis observed the resentment in Veronica's eyes. He was recovering his own temper. She was so extremely pretty, and the play of her expression fascinated him. When she was at all moved her lips seemed to tighten over her little teeth.

"I shall begin to hate you in a minute," she whispered, half in earnest. He reassured her.

"No you won't; because you know there's nobody else here that I could talk to like this."

Veronica's face changed again, electrically. It was as though a spark made her eyes flame.

"Not Adela?" she demanded abruptly. Louis observed her with wonderment. It seemed such an odd inquiry to come after their talk of this evening. What had Adela to do with it?

"Oh no," he answered. "I'm quite sure she's made up her mind."

"What about?"

"Daunton. Everything." It was Veronica's turn to smile at a naïveté. She was quite recovered.

"Silly boy. So have I," she retorted. "There's no shaking me. Because I know I'm right."

"Well," said Louis frankly. "I think you might be shaken. . . ."

"Is that what you're counting on?" Veronica was sparkling now, daring him, using all her charm.

"Not altogether," he admitted. "But you haven't answered my question about what the nice girl would do."

Veronica began to frown again. She remembered, perhaps, the indiscretion of allowing oneself too great a warmth of feeling in sight of so many curious Beckwithians.

"I forget what you said," she answered untruthfully. "But, anyway, a nice girl . . ." There was a pause.

"Well?" asked Louis. "Do tell me what she'd do. I'm all impatience to hear."

"Oh, don't let's talk any more about it. Or him. It's no good arguing. You only get excited, and you don't change anything. If people all thought for themselves it would be too dreadfully unsettling. Of course Eric must do what his people want him to. He owes them everything. Besides . . . I'm sure he *will* do what he's told. He always has done, all his life . . ." Her mouth was rather bitterly curved at the last words.

"I wonder what you mean," Louis said venturesomely. "I know so little about him."

Veronica, in reply, looked directly at Louis for an instant. Their eyes met—not quite full, but in an exchanged glance still more suggestive in its intimacy and perilousness.

"Perhaps I'll tell you . . . some day," Veronica said, in a curious voice.

viii

What did she mean? He could not guess; but his pulses quickened at the implication. As she sat at the piano, or moved about the room, or stood within his view, there was no doubt that he felt her challenge. She had something in her nature that piqued and intrigued him. Was there any kind of relation between Veronica and Daunton? She had almost suggested it. Was that to rouse a first vague jealousy in himself? He strove to remember if the names of Veronica and Daunton had ever been coupled. It was then that his aloofness from the general life of Beckwith hampered him. He did not know. Did she want to marry Daunton? Was she a girl so bent upon marriage that she would not too scrupulously examine the integrity of her lover's affection? And if she wanted to marry Daunton, were not her confidences to himself, the over-eager invitations of Mrs. Hughes, the personal invitation to music-practice, marks of another inclination? What had her inquiry—her sharp inquiry—about Adela indicated? Really, Louis was quite puzzled at his own interrogations! They drove him to Miss Lampe!

"Well, Miss Lampe," he said. "What a lot has happened since you came to dinner with us!"

Miss Lampe, sitting in her black dress in an easy chair far away from the fire, looked from her shrivelled face with those alert eyes that he so much suspected. But those eyes were now suspicious of him, of his tone.

"Yes, indeed," Miss Lampe said, in her voluble manner. "Such a lot of things . . ."

"This party, and the new grocer with the curious name, and Mr. Dumaresque, and the Daunton affair," Louis proceeded, in his low, dry voice.

Miss Lampe quailed at his allusion to the grocer, and she surveyed him hungrily.

"Poor Mr. Dumaresque," she said, singling out that name as momentarily safe. "But how did you hear about him? I thought it was quite a secret . . . quite a secret."

"Ah, Miss Lampe," Louis said. "You'd hardly believe how much I know about Beckwith."

"Really . . . really!" said Miss Lampe expectantly. "It's such a change for me to hear anything about the neighbourhood. Living so far away from the common . . ."

"Why, *everything* must pass your house, Miss Lampe!"

Miss Lampe knew that. She wanted to know something else.

"I should so much like to know how you heard about Mr. Dumaresque, poor dear man! Did Veronica tell you?"

"Ah, you mustn't guess!" Louis said.

"What a dear girl she is . . ." hinted Miss Lampe.

"She's charming, isn't she!" Instinctively wary, in such company, he added: "All three of them are charming."

"Yes . . . yes . . . " Miss Lampe said, as though she were reserving judgment upon the faults of all. "All of them, of course, all of them. I thought it might have been Veronica who told you, because you've been talking to her. . . . I think she's so sweet. . . . One of the sweetest natures in our little town, I always say."

"I'm sure she would like to hear that you thought so," observed Louis. "But Mr. Dumaresque is not the only person I have heard about. I'm very sorry for him, of course; or rather, I should be, if I knew him. But I'm really more interested in Eric Daunton. Can you tell me exactly what it is he's done?"

"Oh, *very* dreadful . . . very painful. . . . But you're quite a gossip, Mr. Louis!"

"Aren't I! *Do* tell me all about it. Who is the young woman?"

"She's a . . . Her name is Ethel . . . I don't know her surname. Ethel . . . And she is the daughter of a . . . H'm, h'm . . . Her father is a . . . a small . . . tradesman at Penge. . . . It seems that poor Eric met her—quite by accident; so she can't be *at all* a nice girl; and he's written some most foolish letters. Mrs. Daunton is quite anxious, because if the girl is . . . you understand . . . It might mean . . ." Miss Lampe whispered. "A law case, for breach of promise. . . ." Her eyes glistened at such a feverish prospect

"Is Mrs. Daunton's objection to the girl, or to the fact that her father's a tradesman?" asked Louis.

"Oh, it's *quite* impossible, Mr. Louis. . . . And Mrs. Daunton had *so* set her heart on a match with some suitable girl in the neighbourhood. It would steady him so much. Poor boy, I'm afraid he needs ballast."

"D'you mean he's always been weak-kneed?"

"Oh yes. He's always been fancying himself in love."

"I suppose with other unsuitable girls . . ."

"Well, so young, you know. Or else not what I call *nice* girls. D'you know what I mean?"

"Not his social equals."

"Well, and then," said Miss Lampe, in a very low voice. "Of course the Hughes girls are very nice,—they're dear girls. But you know there was that silly business with dear Vera . . ."

For a second time that evening Louis's heart gave a bound. He did not, however, move.

"You mean, with Daunton . . ." he said, as casually as he could.

"Oh yes . . . of course you remember. She was only sixteen; and he was about nineteen. They planned an elopement. So foolish and romantic. I remember crying

at the time. Mrs. Callum and I were sitting in my front room, and you know there's a lamp-post outside. And we saw the two of them go by to catch the eleven-thirty train at night. And Mrs. Callum said to me: 'Where are those children going together at this time of night . . . together?' We just saw their faces as they hurried past. It seemed so *strange!* So Mrs. Callum went to the station while I hurried up the lane to Mrs. Hughes. Mr. Hughes came down and caught them just in time; for Mrs. Callum walked up and down the platform and prevented them from coming out of the waiting-room, where they were hiding. So just as the train was coming in Mr. Hughes arrived—I stayed behind, because I didn't want to seem to know anything about it. And he caught them, and took Veronica home. It was very hard on her, but it taught her a lesson. What a dear girl she is!"

"But what a sensational affair!" Louis said, not looking at Miss Lampe.

"And you see how weak poor Eric Daunton is."

"He *does* seem to be unlucky in his affairs," commented Louis. At which Miss Lampe laughed, "He, he, he!" and looked affectionately across the room at Veronica, who was wondering what story Louis was hearing.

ix

At ten o'clock the party was over. Beckwith is always early, and supper was at half-past eight. Miss Lampe had to seek her home near the railway station. Mrs. Callum was going back to her cottage along the common, just past the High Street. The Dumaresques were going to their big red-brick house in the centre of the town. Miss Deadwood and the young player upon the clarinet had still farther to go. Eric Daunton and his mother lived almost next door to the Hughes family. There was

a general dispersal. Fortunately an old gentleman was going to see Miss Lampe home, as he lived even farther away than she did, upon the farther side of the railway; so Louis and Daunton took possession of Miss Deadwood and Irene Corntoft, and their music-cases; and all gathered laughing and talking in the big hall. Louis had no further direct speech with Veronica, and she did not offer to shake hands with him. He noticed that she shook hands with Daunton, and supposed the difference to indicate some greater familiarity at this time with himself. As he came away Mrs. Hughes stopped him.

"Now mind," she said. "You're to come over one evening soon. We shall be very glad to see you any evening. That's a promise, isn't it!"

Veronica said, close beside him in the doorway:

"Don't forget to bring some songs to practise!" He looked down, but the words had been spoken in a low tone, and she was already turning away from him. He stepped out into the chilly air, under a clear moon that made the grass stand up silver against the black earth. The door was closed behind him. The others were waiting. What a curious evening it had been! And it was as yet by no means over, for the church clock was only then chiming a quarter-past ten in a sharp brazen tone. The notes cut the air, so still was Beckwith, and so windless the night. He hurried after Daunton and the two girls.

X

It was on the way back from the centre of the town that Daunton spoke directly to Louis. They had hitherto been walking in almost complete silence along the deserted streets.

"These damned people!" he said. "I'm sick of them all."

"I expect you are!" agreed Louis cordially. "You must have reason."

Daunton walked beside him a few paces without acknowledging this remark. Then, suddenly, he forsook silence, and in a shaky, boyish voice he blurted out what was in his tormented mind.

"You've heard all about me, I expect," he said. "It's simply damnable. I'd cut the whole thing and clear out, only I'm in my father's business and I shouldn't have a shilling. They treat me as if I was a kid. I'm not! I know this time what I'm doing. I tell you, I'm half mad."

"Is there anything I can do?" Louis asked. "I'm awfully sorry. I can guess what a rotten time you're having. You mustn't let yourself be overborne by all this clatter. That is . . . I suppose you're strong enough to follow your own course, if you've made up your mind to it."

"Of course it's the mater," cried Daunton. "She somehow found a letter. Well, I *know* there were spelling mistakes in it. What does *that* matter? All the girls in Beckwith spell venomous with two e's. It's a thing they know all about . . . the little cats. She's a *real* girl . . . I mean, somebody. . . . I *can't* explain it to you. Oh, I'm mad! I'm mad! Just because I met her in the train, and spoke to her! She's so lovely . . . and beastly unhappy at home, because she's not understood. They think she's an adventuress. They say I'm a boy who's taken in. Mater talks about the disgrace of it. . . . My word, she's an actress! To hear her talk about the duty one owes, the bitterest day of her life, and so on. . . . And there's not a soul in Beckwith who cares two straws about me or about Ethel as human beings. We're to do as we're told. In case, I suppose, the wonderful Daunton blood is contaminated. Why, good God!

you know that we're a part of the coal firm—Daunton, Daunton, and Dare—don't you? Everybody knows. But because we've washed the sweat off our faces we're more select than the Cecils. And she's a *real* girl . . . not like these stupid puppets here . . . doing what their mothers tell them! Except on the sly. I could tell you things about them. . . . She's a friend, and a mistress, and a wife. All in one. She'd give the Beckwith girls points and beat them at anything they like to name. Anything! I don't care what anybody says! But no! Mater says it's 'quite too impossible'; and she's pretending that Ethel's a common tart, who's snared me! The vulgarity of it! It makes me sick to hear her!"

"But look here, old chap," said Louis. "You're of age; your mother can do nothing at all. You've got it all in your own hands. You can do just exactly what you like."

"I know. And she knows. That's what makes her so virulent. I tell you—the difference between the two of them! But I *couldn't* tell you. It makes me ashamed. But all that doesn't make it any better. Surely you know that things aren't done by force. Practically they never are. They're done by making you feel uncomfortable. You feel you ought not to do it. You're 'cut,' or you're ruined, or humiliated. You're not punished. They can't do it. They'd like to put you in gaol; but it isn't done. They can only compel you by their opinion. So they make you feel an outsider. I could fight against an order; but this is different. I've always been at home. I've got no resources. I owe everything to my pater. And that's what they work on! My debt. I feel as if there were chains on me. I feel hopeless!"

"I should get another job at once," Louis said. "Any sort of job, whatever it is."

"Would you?" Daunton eagerly clutched at that.

"Look here, Vechantor—I know I'm a soft sort of chap. Things have always been too much for me. But I've got nobody to stand by me . . . except Ethel. I've got nobody who's said a kind word to me for three weeks. It's been going on since three weeks ago. I can't live without . . . well, without feeling somebody believes in me. I go crazy, and give in. And I've sulked at home; and felt mad and blustering. I've heard myself talking . . . and not believed what I was saying. As though it was all false. I've meant it all—about not giving in. Every word. It's been true; but I've felt it wasn't true. I've felt it was just grizzling. Even when I was saying the finest, staunchest things. But I've felt hopeless—felt I should have to give in at the end, simply because I've always had to give in. . . . That's the worst of it."

Louis nodded, forgetting that he could not be seen.

"Will she marry you at once?" he demanded.

"She won't until she's quite sure I mean it. She saw at once I was wobbling. I couldn't hide it from her, though I tried. She's stronger than I am. She's got me sized-up. The first time I saw her . . . after this . . . after the letter, she said: 'What's the matter?' Not like that—more gently than that. She knew at once. Of course I raved. I said nothing should come between us. That was silly, and she knew it. She cut right through all my heroics. She offered to let me chuck her. She went all different—not cold, but as though I was a child . . . as though she was years older. Oh, she's a sport! She says she's just as fond of me; but she doesn't want anything I don't want with all my heart. I feel they're both as hard as nails; but it's come to be a question of choosing between them. It's my mother or her; and she won't have me unless I make a clean choice. That's what she says, and I believe her. She's never told

me a lie, though she might have, lots of times. . . . Oh, *lots* of times!"

Daunton's strained voice, the absolute sincerity of his confession, and the dreadful air of truth in his account of the girl's attitude, struck Louis like a poniard. He was carried away. He saw Daunton as fighting for something more precious than his own life. He was struggling to deserve the love of the girl he truly loved. With a cowardice that had run through his whole life still checking him from being outright, he yet aspired to an ideal courage that was not his own.

"Well, you stick to her!" cried Louis, in a thick, angry voice. "Stick to her. If she's strong enough not to lose her head when she sees you wobbling—not to get hysterical and threatening, I mean—you ought to make sure of her. She's a woman in a thousand. She'll be the making of you." He was answering passionate sincerity with a sincerity as urgent. A wave of liking for Daunton, liking and pity, swept him into vehement response to this appeal for his help. He was arrogant to all the world in his sympathy with Daunton.

"I say!" exclaimed Daunton, stopping in the quiet street. "What a brick you are!" They were shy, but exultant, both of them moved. In daylight they could not have been so intimate. Both were transfigured.

"No," said Louis, ashamed to receive such thanks. "I'm not. I wish I were! Only I'm just for the first time beginning to look about me and take notice. I wish I had your chance of standing to my guns. I envy you. I wish I could help you. Really help you."

"Look here . . ." Daunton drew him under a lamp-post and brought from his pocket a leather case. Within it was a midget photograph of a pretty girl. It did not seem to Louis that she was exceptionally attractive. The face was one which would not have caught his attention

But he found there the honesty he was prepared to see. He was in the mood to see only the priceless candour of a good woman. The two young men pored upon the photograph in the light of the street lamp, the one devotedly, the other with a kind of angry anti-social delight in supporting personal rebellion.

"You're not a boy," Louis said at last, his voice still thrilling with temper and the ardour of his new championship. "If you make a mistake—I mean, if it shouldn't turn out exactly as you planned—at any rate you'll have followed your own conviction. Not somebody else's prejudice. Don't budge! Don't budge an inch!"

"I say!" cried Daunton delightedly. "You're a real pal! I can't tell you what it's meant to me to be able to talk to you like this—to have you so decent about it. If you were in love you'd know how I feel. But you'd never be a coward, as I am. You're not like that. I've . . . I know I'm a fool; but I've . . . I've always admired you no end, Vechantor. . . ." He wavered there in the half-light, his eyes glistening, looking away with involuntary shame at such frankness. For a moment they stood awkwardly without speech, Louis wonderstruck at such an avowal, but not quite master enough of himself to be anything but moved by it. Then Daunton blurted out, like an ashamed schoolboy: "I say . . . excuse me . . . I'm ever so grateful . . . Don't think of me as anything but that. I'd like to go on telling you . . . I'd like you to tell me something about yourself . . . Only I *must* get off somewhere and gloat over it a bit!" He hung still, trembling, and his eyes shining. Then, with an effort, he pulled himself together. With a fierce handshake he disappeared into the darkness, walking swiftly, with his head erect and his arms swinging.

xi

It was then that Louis, in an exalted flurry of high spirits, no less fervent because his own happiness was not involved, noticed where they had been standing. They had been standing directly opposite the shop of Peel the grocer. It gave him a curious sensation to look across and see the drab-coloured blinds and the elaborate gilt lettering over the shop-front. He continued quite still, his heart beating quickly from the excitement of the scene which had just concluded. And then, to his astonishment, as he raised his eyes above the shop-front, he saw that the dwelling-room immediately over the shop was faintly illumined. The light, which moved about, and which cast long pale shadows, appeared to be that of a candle held by somebody who was also in motion. He could see that the walls of the room were quite bare. He remembered, then, that somebody had spoken of Peel as removing first thing on Boxing-morning—at six o'clock; and that he expected to be away by midday. Then the living part of Peel's business premises was now altogether empty. Who was walking there, with a candle, at this time of night?

Could it be Peel? Had the removal been a longer job than had been expected? Was it Peel and his wife who remained, carefully examining their emptied rooms and perhaps collecting the last fragments for personal removal to their new home? Or could it . . . could it possibly be that the candle was held at this moment by the new owner of the business, his own cousin, the man whose arrival in Beckwith had seemed such a calamity, had brought upon Louis that attack from his father which had begun the change in his outlook upon things in gen-

eral? Louis put his hand to his mouth, standing there in deep thought. He was in quite a curious excitement. If this were Peel, the matter had no interest for him. If, upon the other hand, it were his cousin, what should he do? It was no sentimentality that moved him; it was a conviction that lay deep in his heart. He did not know what action his mother had taken or would take concerning these undesirable relatives. He only knew that at this moment, fresh from the Hughes's party and all the unusual feelings to which it had given rise, he felt in him a determination to do what he considered right, to force his mother's hand, to shame his father. All that had been said during the evening took its part in this resolve. He was filled with defiant contempt for Beckwith. He stepped down from the pavement, and across the road; and he found the knocker of the door beside the shop. Should he? What was the hesitation? Why *should* he hesitate?

Louis knocked.

The knock went echoing gently up the bare boards of the staircase. He could imagine the startled silence in the room above. He waited. After a few moments he heard heavy steps upon the stairs. In the glass fanlight above the door he saw dim jerking lights and shadows which showed that the candle—or a candle—was being cautiously brought to the door. He braced himself.

A man in his shirt-sleeves, a smallish stout man with a chubby face and a grey moustache, a man with a broad silver watch chain and a coloured shirt, and a pleasant air of moderate prosperity, stood in the doorway. He had raised the candle to the level of his face so that it might shine upon the face of the caller.

"Good evening, sir," he said, with civility.

"Good evening." Louis was now very nervous and

hurried. "Are you . . . are you Mr. William Vechantor?"

"Yes, sir," the man said. "That is my name."

"Oh, look here," cried Louis. "Can I come in half-a-minute? I'm your cousin. I'm Louis Vechantor."

CHAPTER V: OVER THE SHOP

i

AND when he had said these words Louis was struck for an instant with a kind of marvel, at finding himself upon the doorsteps of Peel's shop, at such an hour, introducing himself to the cousin whose coming to Beckwith had appeared such a disaster. His marvel, however, disappeared at once; and he felt that there had never in all his life been a moment so natural and so right. The man with the candle did not make any motion of surprise, except to raise his candle a little higher. Then, after a pause that neither could have noticed, he said in a quite ordinary and unbewildered voice:

"So you're Louis, are you? Come upstairs . . . I'm afraid it's a bit bare yet."

He closed the door as Louis entered, and stamped towards the stair, holding the candle so that it gave his cousin some help in finding his way. Together they mounted to the first floor.

"Mum," called William Vechantor. "Here's a visitor for you."

As he spoke he ushered Louis into a back room, where there was a meagre fire, and where a glass lamp stood shedding its light beam. The room was unfurnished, but three people were sitting round the fire upon the three up-turned drawers of a kitchen dresser. They all looked up with, as Louis thought, an air of constraint—almost of consternation—at such an intruder. Louis stood in the

doorway, and William, having blown out and snuffed the candle, shut this door, facing them all.

In the dim light Louis could see very little of the group by the fire. The walls rose naked, in a covering of dark, rather soiled paper. The mantelpiece was empty, the floor bare. The lamp, standing upon a big box by the window, was behind his cousins, and their faces were lighted only by flickerings from the fire. One of them, he saw, was a small plump woman of middle age—clearly William's wife; and he distinguished a girl and a boy who stared at him in a startled way. Both of them rose after a moment. The boy, he thought, might be sixteen; the girl was rather older. Neither was very tall. So these five people looked at each other in the semi-darkness.

"I'm afraid it's a strange time to come," Louis began awkwardly. "But I saw a light; and I couldn't resist knocking. My name's Louis Vechantor, and I think you must all be my cousins."

"That's all right, Louis," said William cheerfully. "Take a drawer, will you?"

He went to the window and brought the lamp, which he placed upon the mantelpiece.

"Well, it's a surprise," said his wife. "And a pleasure, I'm sure." But the last words followed rather mechanically, so that it needed a further remark to give it support. "A great pleasure," she insisted.

"Yes," added William. "To tell you the truth, Louis, when Doll there turned up your name in the day-book we got a nasty jar. Mum was in a bit of a fright . . . weren't you, my dear? Thought we'd put our foot in it." He turned suddenly to Louis. "Perhaps we *have?*" he added, in a sort of inquiry. Louis gave a little nervous laugh.

"Well," he admitted. "I believe you *have,* as a matter of fact."

The other four exchanged a look. Only the boy squared his jaw.

"We're as good as you," he muttered.

"Bob down, Reg.," said his father. Louis turned with a smile to William.

"It's given them something to talk about," he explained.

"But your pa and ma," Mrs. William said. "I wish we hadn't come!"

Louis began to laugh. His two elder cousins smiled at his expression.

"It's really awfully funny," he cried. "Mind, I ought to tell you . . . I don't know what made me come tonight. When we first heard the news I said we oughtn't to take any notice of you. I mean, that we ought to let all question of relationship be ignored. But you see I'm the first tc go against that. I just couldn't help coming. I've been to a party, and I'm on my way home. And I saw a candle, so I simply crossed the street. . . . And here I am."

"Well, sit *down,* now you're here," William urged. Louis sat, and the girl moved away into the shadow. "Go on, Doll," her father said sharply.

"No, *you* . . ." she cried; but after a hesitation resumed her seat upon the only remaining drawer.

Louis looked across at Mrs. William.

"It was very kind of you," she said; "but I think you were right. I've been in an awful taking ever since I knew."

"You have, Mum; you have," William agreed. "Well, Louis; you know as well as I do that you can't draw back at this stage. Doesn't do. And of course the kids are both upstarts, and they wanted banners all round the

town for a start off. But we're going to do without that, for Mum's sake."

At this it seemed to Louis that the girl, who sat upon the third dresser-drawer immediately upon his left, gave a slight and scornful laugh. The thought ran through him: "The older ones are all right; the children are little beasts"; but he did not say anything or give any sign that he had heard the sound.

"But all the same," plaintively remarked William's wife, still crushed by her understanding of the scandal they had created in Beckwith, "it's very hard on Mr. and Mrs. Vechantor. I wish we hadn't come."

"You've been saying that all the time, Mum," said her husband.

"It's true," she retorted. "That's why I say it, Will."

"Try another record, old girl," said William.

"Or a fresh needle," added Reginald, clumsily over-emphasising his father's figure of speech. But Reginald was not to go unpunished for this rudeness to the visitor.

"Bob down, Reg.," his father said. "Had enough of little boys. He's only sixteen, Louis; and a bit bumptious. Well, now; where do we stand, eh? Just about where we were, isn't it?" Louis looked at him gratefully.

"I'm afraid so," he said. "May I say what I think? It's this. As far as I'm concerned my cousins can have their banners. They can plaster the whole town with bills. But they won't hurt my mother or myself. They'll simply injure the business and drive away custom; because everybody will be offended. But that's got nothing to do with the main question. I'm glad you've come. My father won't be. My mother will be the one to suffer."

"She *mustn't!*" cried Mrs. William. "It's not fair on her."

"Oh, you can't stop it now. It's too late. And you mustn't think I've come from her . . . or to pry on you; for that wouldn't be true. Nor to complain. I should like to come again, if I may. I mean, when you've moved in. May I?"

"*May* he!" exclaimed William, in his cheerful voice. "That's the tone, isn't it, Mum?"

"I don't think he ought to," pathetically said Mrs. William, in a humble voice.

"Mum!" came in a bitter whisper from beside Louis. "Oh! . . . Why don't you tell him at once that we don't want to have anything . . ."

Louis turned to the girl, whose face he could see in the lamplight. It was flushed and mutinous. Her lips were curved in an angry way, as though she were exasperated beyond bearing. He essayed to finish her broken sentence.

" . . . to do with me?" he asked quietly.

"They're both tired out," said Mrs. William in eager apology. "Both of them are."

"I'm not!" cried Dorothy.

"Well, then, you're very ill-mannered." Her mother's voice took a quick turn.

"We were quite happy before he came!" Dorothy said in a suppressed voice—not of shame, but of unbearable anger.

Louis rose at once. William put a hand upon his arm.

"Sit down, lad," he begged. "Just because we've been gentle with your young cousins they're both a bit bumptious. As I told you. Doll's a good girl; but she's one to make a fuss. Can't be helped. It's nature. Take no notice. Now . . . whenever you like to drop in and see us, I shall be glad. So'll Mum. And your mother and father—any time. But if you don't come . . . See what I mean? We shan't feel huffy. We're sociable,

but not social, if you understand the distinction. Mum here can tell you all about the royal marriages—who married who and whose daughter and sister the Princess Christian is. She loves gossip. She's got a proper respect for gentry, has Mum. But the kids haven't. They're . . . well, they're a bit trying. Too big for their boots, if you know what I mean. And I've knocked about a bit. I've seen the world. And I'm a provision-dealer and don't call myself a grocer outside the family circle. And if you're a man you'll find me one. . . ."

"That was what I was thinking, cousin William," said Louis, with a quick smile and a nod that showed his liking. He was delighted with both of his elder cousins; but was not at all pleased with the others.

ii

After a moment, in which quick perceptions of these likings and distastes made themselves felt in his questioning mind, he turned to his girl-cousin, whom her father called Doll.

"I don't see why you should be so angry with me," he said directly. "I haven't hurt you . . ." It was a cry of impatience at misunderstanding of his nature.

"What I was going to say," continued William, pressing down the rising head of discontent, "was that Mum's got gentry on the brain. She's morbid about them. Her father kept a village shop; and she was taught to curtesy before she could walk. And she'll simply make a fool of herself if your mother comes to buy a pound of lard. She'd better keep away. But if your mother is a real lady, as I should think she *was,* by the look of you, Mum here's as good a lady as ever wore furs. You can see her any Sunday. She's Church of England. You'll see us sitting under the Parson every Sunday morning; and

you'd never be able to tell she'd ever done a stroke of work in her life. As for me . . . in ten years' time, now my Holloway shop's established, as you may say, there's no reason why I shouldn't be half a gentleman myself. I mean, smoking cigars and jingling coppers in my pocket. The pity is, the kids are growing up fidgety. Things aren't good enough for them. They're touchy. They don't like to see me in an apron, so they shout the odds against the people who never wore aprons . . ."

"We don't!" cried both the delinquents.

"To hear them talk, it's a sin *not* to keep a shop. That's the way they get their own back for having been brought up in one. It's a common error, Louis. . . . You'll find it out in good time. What you were born is the best . . . till you *become* something else. When Reg. here gets what he's after he'll think nobody's any good but a civil engineer . . ."

"You don't understand!" impatiently cried Dorothy. "It's the idea that because you're a grocer you haven't as much right here as . . . these other people!" Her voice trembled with indignation.

Louis exchanged a long glance with William. They understood each other very well, and from that moment they were friends.

"I now understand," Louis remarked to his friend, "what the Parson here means when he talks about the Revolutionary Ferment. This is it. I never understood before."

iii

Dorothy had turned away, and was looking into the meagre fire. Nothing could so have estranged her as this slight ridicule. Louis knew now that she was unlike her mother and father. She was dark—not as dark as him-

self, but dark and pale. Her nose had an independent tilt; her lips were full (but that might have been because she was indignant). He could not see her eyes. They were averted from him. She had hardly cared to see her cousin, once the fact of his relationship had been established. She was brusque, and sudden in her movements, like somebody with a quick temper and a grievance. He could tell that she was slim, but not thin; but he could not tell whether she was graceful, because dresser-drawers, although useful in an emergency, are not the most suitable of seats. Upon the whole Louis saw no reason to revise his earlier judgment. He was very much drawn to William, liked Mrs. William because she seemed to him to be motherly and kind, and felt a fairly strong antipathy towards both the children. They seemed to him to be ill-bred and ill-mannered. Nevertheless, he thought William atoned; since William and he were become friends. It was as though he made a forgiving, annihilating gesture with his hand, to make Dorothy's indignant blood boil afresh at his insufferable courtesy.

"Now I really must go," Louis said. "And if you're going to catch a train to-night you ought to go, too."

"Hey, hey!" cried William. "That's true. Not that we're catching a train, because we're at the Red Lion, or the Golden Lion, or whatever it's called, to-night. I was almost afraid to give my name there. But I reckon the name of Vechantor is a bit of a draw in these parts—from the way the laddies skip round at it. When I went in with the troupe they looked at us rather old-fashioned, as the saying is; but—— Piff! When they heard the name!"

"It makes me sick!" Dorothy said, half aloud.

What a disagreeable girl! thought Louis as he was let out at the front door. He made his way across the common smiling at recollections of William, but frowning when he thought of the two rude young ones and especial-

ly when he thought of the girl, who was, being the elder, the more unforgivably rude of the two. As he crossed the common he looked back at the Hughes's house. In an upper window he could see, as well as upon the first floor, an illumination. The Hughes family was going to bed. Was that upper window Veronica's room by any chance? He wondered. Wondering, he sighed sharply. What an evening it had been! And what a lot it had given him to think about! Daunton's affair and Veronica's manner. And what Miss Lampe had told him . . . about Daunton and Veronica . . . and then his cousins, William and Mrs. William, and the boy . . . and that disagreeable girl with the modern, aggressive manner. Hey ho! He yawned.

"I don't mind how soon I'm in bed," Louis said to himself. "But all the same, it's been rather a lark, this evening. A lark . . ." His mind drifted off. He wondered what Veronica's quick "not Adela?" had meant. And one or two other little half-memories of Veronica's movements or expressions darted waywardly in his mind. "Yes," he thought. "I bet the name *did* make a sensation at the Lion. By George! Of course, that's what's made her so sick!"

He was still smiling as he entered the house.

CHAPTER VI: WOMEN

i

FOR some days after this Louis had plenty of material for his private thoughts. In general his life went quietly on. He met his mother and father at dinner in the evening, or he was in town, at theatres or with his personal acquaintances; and his superficial attention was occupied with daily affairs. But underneath his attention, flying every now and then up to the surface after the fashion of air bubbles, went on those more profound, more secret musings which composed his real mental life. They were vague; they had rapidities unperceived, and influences upon his character which none could calculate. They were like that stealthy and unnoticed physical change which is all the time in progress within us and which leads to the perpetual renewal of physical force in our bodies. In his ordinary behaviour Louis did not alter; those who saw him every day—even his mother, for all her care—had no notion of the interior development which was going on. She did not know he had been to see William. She did not know of his talk with Daunton. She could only speculate as to the effects following upon his walk across the common with Adela and Judith and Veronica. Louis himself hardly knew what had happened to him. He felt differently, but he was not aware of the daily change. Nevertheless, he lived a good deal in the days following the party.

Adela and Veronica, of course, were much in his mind.

When he thought of their prettiness he unconsciously smiled with delight. When he thought that Veronica had deliberately wanted to charm him, to attract him—by her nearness, her intimate, coaxing turnings to himself, her lowered voice in giving that double invitation (as though it were a private understanding between them)—he still, by a kind of wilful blindness, wished to be successfully charmed. To be doped by her charm. The two feelings, not expressed, but deep in his consciousness, were mingled and diffused. To say right out that Veronica was willing to marry him, willing to go rather more than half-way to meet him in such an ambition, was quite impossible to Louis. And yet some faint feeling of that kind, far back, lulling with primitive complacency his scrutinising spirit, did persistently add to his commencing desire for her. The thought that she liked him was beautifully sweet. The thought of her pretty, soft cheeks, her temptingly veiled eyes, the white throat and the tender curve of her breast, was often with him, tantalising him. Above all, the thought of her bewitching mouth, the tiny gleaming teeth, and the imagination of touching such soft warm lips, came dancing into his mind with a mischievous persistency.

What, then, was it that gave him that curious feeling which confused itself with these more delectable thoughts of Veronica? It was the feeling that he saw through her and found her shallow and selfish; and yet that she was sweet, naïve, exquisitely simple; that he did not wish to see through her; that she was calculatingly ready to marry him, as she would have been to marry any other young man of equal position and attractiveness if there had been one in the district; that she thought nothing at all of marriage, but was eager to vary the sameness of her days and evenings; that she was innocent, cynical, wanton, inexpressibly fragile, tough, warm as love itself,

cold as steel, pure, treacherous, inscrutable; now unconsciously, now with the deepest cunning of her sex, provocative. . . . One day he would come to a conclusion; would deliberately choose which road he would as deliberately follow in thinking of her. He would decide whether he loved her or not. There was no other criterion. If one loved, one thrust far back, away from one, thoughts of a girl's basenesses. And if one didn't love . . . Oh, it wasn't a question of truth at all. Only of illusion. In the last resort, of cultivated illusion. What was love itself but the egregious name given to a tumult of desires and illusions? Why should one shut one's eyes to that? Louis hurled all the discoveries of youth at the moralists. They were ignorant, cowardly, materialist under a fawning profession of idealism. The women even more than the men, because their pretensions were greater. Hypocrites!

And through all his torment his mother remain sacrosanct to Louis.

ii

Mrs. Hughes was fifty. She had married when she was twenty; and four years afterwards she had given birth to Adela. Adela, therefore, was twenty-six. Judith was twenty-four. Veronica was twenty-three. Mr. Hughes was the manager of one of the city branches of a large bank; and he sometimes said at home that he thought it would be a good thing if his daughters were married. When Adela had a birthday he raised his eyebrows. Each year brought her nearer to the dangerous age past which a girl could hardly go in Beckwith. What was a passing thought to Mr. Hughes had become a commonplace and a cause of active concern to Miss Lampe, and Mrs. Callum, and Mrs. Deadwood, and Mrs.

Dumaresque, and Mrs. Grenville, and Mrs. March, and Mrs. Daunton, and all the other ladies in Beckwith. She was such a dear girl, they said. What a pity some young man did not see her excellent qualities in the proper light! So much Louis could not help knowing. He had known first when she was twenty-one that somebody had thought what a good wife she would be for the right man. At the time it had not struck him as a funny remark, but it might now have struck him as a rather tragic remark. It was like a fatal saying, dooming the poor girl to maidenhood.

As a girl Adela had been given rather to affectations, and so Louis had not cared for her greatly. She had worn her hair eccentrically, and had early taken to tight lacing. She had been "grown-up" before her time, and he remembered that she had looked at him with sophisticated eyes in days when he had become self-conscious about his sex. She had known other boys better than he. He had seen her, at fourteen or fifteen, riding upon bicycles, and had met her at small distances, always with two or three rather croaking juvenile cavaliers, who smoked cigarettes and had their hair greatly brushed and heavily watered. He remembered that he had never formed one of her party, but had been commented upon by it. He even thought that Adela had made some advances to him at that time, but they were half-forgotten. Among his intuitions had been the belief that Adela's journeyings involved the telling of small fibs, such as that she had cycled to such and such a place with another girl, a friend. The other girl had been—not absolutely an invention, but an accomplice, with her own cavaliers. Louis remembered her pasty face and harsh voice. He had not liked either of them. Nor had he liked the boys, who wore school caps upon the backs of their watered heads and who held their cigarettes in such a way that

the burning ends were palm-inwards, ready for concealment in case any adult should by chance come that way. It had all ended, whether by discovery or through natural causes, he did not know; and Adela, who, he thought, must have known a good deal about boys before she had grown out of them, had become a prim maiden by the time he went to Oxford.

Judith, the second girl, Louis knew very little about. He was not much attracted to her, because she had such an odd air of concerning herself with things that she would not publicly own. She was the sort of girl who locked herself in her bedroom and smoked cigarettes out of the window before she was sixteen; but she did not do that now, and Louis had lost touch with her activities. He knew her less well than either of the others. She was a great reader, and was getting short-sighted. She had a sharp tongue, and laughed, as at a double entente, at many things which Louis did not himself perfectly understand. Her conversation was always very much the same, and she often rebuked her sisters for priggishness. But in talk she was not herself very daring.

Veronica was much fresher than either of the others. He was certain of that. In all his thoughts of her Louis was convinced that she was the gem of the family. She was the youngest princess of the fairy-stories, wilful and charming. She had always, from childhood, been his little friend, although latterly they had been less intimate. Louis thought of her a great deal, even when he did not see her. His failure to call at the Hughes's had been weighing upon him, and after the party he felt bound to go there in response to the repeated invitations that had been given. So one evening he walked across the common and knocked at the door in quite a sparkle of curiosity as to his reception and all those unguessable sequels that lay in the intoxicatingly unknown future.

The door of the house was opened—not by a maid, but by a charming figure that silhouetted itself against a background of bright light.

"Hullo, Louis!" cried Adela. "Come along in! Glad to see you! Is it snowing? No, I see it isn't. Stupid of me to ask!" She stood back, ushering him into the room; and Louis felt the warmth from that hearty fire like a gust of cheerfulness. The girls were all there, and Mrs. Hughes was reading a book in a red cover. It was a peaceful, comfortable scene. Judith was sprawling upon a couch away from the light and the heat, reading a book that contained diagrams; and she now sat up, yawning, and pulled her skirt from under her so as to cover too-exposed ankles. As she yawned she covered her mouth with the back of her hand: her body stiffened with the abandonment to such a yawn.

Veronica was crocheting directly under a light. She did not look straight at Louis as he entered; but he saw her give a side glance at him as he shook hands with her mother. Even that pleased him, because it was a flattery. He did not know whether she did it deliberately or because she did not want him to read her expression. Young men who are rather in love often receive this perturbing delight when, at meeting, a girl does not raise her eyes. It always leaves them guessing. Veronica was this evening specially charming, for she wore a pale blue blouse cut slightly low at the neck, so as to show her pretty throat. Her beautiful fair hair, catching sparkles from the light above, shone like gold. Her fingers were extended to support her work, and the attitude in which she sat—her head down and her slender shoulders a little bowed—made her look almost like a young girl. Louis felt a warm pulse of feeling, a kind of catching of the breath, at such a picture. Her neck was so milk-white, and its curves so delicate, from her

shoulder to her ear, and again to her throat, that he could imagine nothing more charming. He was quite lost in admiration, and had to snatch his eyes away in order that his preoccupation with Veronica's loveliness should not be observed.

iii

Louis had been seated only a few minutes when he became aware that Judith had silently closed her book and stolen from the room. The talk disturbed her, and she had gone upstairs to a little room which led to an upper conservatory. Here she would cultivate chilblains over an oil stove and continue her researches among the diagrams. Louis was left with Mrs. Hughes and her two other daughters.

"You've not been here for so long, Louis," said Mrs. Hughes, clucking her arch laugh, "that I'm afraid you've been leading a dissipated life in London. Have you?"

"Very dissipated," agreed Louis. "I've been reading a great deal; and I've been to three theatres in the last month."

"Yes, Miss Lampe said you hadn't caught your usual train several times," agreed Mrs. Hughes.

Veronica peeped at Louis, who was peeping at her.

"Anything good?" Adela carelessly asked, sitting on the arm of Veronica's chair.

"Don't, Adela!" cried Veronica. "You're in my light. . . ." She peered at Louis round Adela until her sister moved languidly away again. There was a scrutinising expression upon her face, that puckered her brow.

"No . . . I don't think I've seen many good plays," Louis said conversationally. "You don't, nowadays. Not in the commercial theatre."

"What's the commercial theatre?" asked Veronica, in rather a pouting voice.

"Oh, Vera, what ignorance!" cried Adela. "Of course she knows, Louis!"

Veronica gave a sudden annoyed jerk, and made a knot in her crochet cotton.

"All right, clever!" she murmured, under her breath. Louis did not hear.

"Oh, dear me!" cried Mrs. Hughes. "I forgot that wretched thing!" She jumped up, threw down her book, and hurried from the room. At their laughter, she called over her shoulder: "Excuse me, Louis!"

"Poor old mother!" said Adela. "She's always got things that she *has* to see to herself. It's not as though we couldn't do them. . . . But she *will* do them herself, in her own way. . . ."

Veronica, probing at the knot in her cotton with the delicate point of her crochet hook, looked up at her sister over this operation with a very singular expression. No word passed between them; but there seemed to be some slight exchange of hostility that mystified Louis.

"I'm beginning to think the commercial theatre's played out," he went on, not because he wanted to talk about it but because he thought Adela looked rather glum. She had been bright at his entry, but there was a hardness in her manner that he could not understand. Her nose looked quite sharp, even pinched—as he had never before noticed it,—and she was almost haggard. He had not thought before that she was paying the penalty for too-early maturity; but she was certainly far from her best. In contrast, Veronica was exquisitely dainty. She easily bore the palm, and some awareness of that made her subtly impudent to Adela. At any rate, he thought he scented the possibilities of disagree-

ment between the sisters. Accordingly he persisted in his uncongenial theme: "I haven't seen anything good in the commercial theatre for years—since I was old enough to understand anything about plays."

"Hark at him!" jeered Veronica. "Talking about 'commercial' theatre as if it was a patent. Louis, when did you become old enough to understand a play?"

"About six months after coming down from Oxford," he said, with a grimacing nod of reproof. "And as for 'commercial,' it's a distinction. It means that you gamble for high stakes."

"Clever!" ejaculated Veronica.

Adela rose from her chair with a sort of majestic impatience.

"I don't know what's the matter with you, this evening, Vera," she said, in a thin voice. "Anybody would think you wanted to be smart."

A faint pink came into Veronica's cheeks.

"How silly of them!" she remarked. "But *you* wouldn't think anything unkind, I know."

Adela's mouth closed sharply. Louis saw that shadowed look pass again over her face, and he puzzled again over it. He knew of no reason for any quarrel between the sisters; but of course it might be just a passing breeze. Nevertheless, it made him rather uncomfortable, and he cast a little appealing look at Veronica. She continued inscrutably to crochet under the light, while Adela sat nearer the fire. Veronica did not look at Louis. She sat perfectly quiet, and he saw her two hands moving with electrifying swiftness at their work. He continued aimlessly to talk about the plays he had seen, describing parts of them; and at length mentioned the work of a dramatic society which produced works considered unsuitable for production in the "commercial" theatre. Quite unintentionally he had

chosen an inopportune theme, with the result that he became embroiled with Adela on the subject of plays written by adults for adults. Louis had forgotten such views as she held, and was appalled to find them still in being. He was still too young not to take his own opinions and tastes seriously, and this was his present undoing. She had not seen any of the productions of the society he had been praising, but she had read the criticisms of them in her father's respectable daily paper, and she had heard more than enough of them. She seemed rather contemptuously puzzled about the aims of such a society.

"Yes," she said. "But what do they want to produce such plays for?"

"How d'you mean?" Louis asked, rather pleased to have found a topic of discussion upon which he could enlarge. "You see, the members subscribe to the society, and these are plays that the committee thinks should be produced privately—although they either wouldn't pass the censor or perhaps wouldn't pay if they were produced in the ordinary way."

"But they're not nice plays," said Adela. "There's no reason why they *should* be produced."

"Oh, but the subscribers want to see them," Louis explained, rather puzzled. "That's what they belong to the society for."

"They oughtn't to be allowed," Adela said. "They only do harm."

"One wants to know what other people are thinking." Louis was rather patient. His white lids fell as he continued. "The people who go to these plays aren't children, of course."

"They must be very morbid," Adela remarked. "The plays are morbid."

"Not all of them. Some of them, of course. But you

can't help that at times. I mean, if you want plays about life . . ." he persisted. Adela, exasperated, retorted upon him.

"You *think* they're about life," she said, with a superior air. "Besides, they're unhealthy. You go to the theatre to be amused. If a play isn't amusing it's got no right to exist."

"Amusing to whom?" Louis asked. "Lots of plays, of course, are failures."

"No; but *these* plays. . . . They do a lot of harm."

"I don't think I agree with you," he said mildly. "Some of them are boring; but some of them are most frightfully interesting. I mean, even to me. I want to know as much as I can—about everything."

Adela's lip curled. She looked at him with a bitter, far-away air of condescension.

"Yes; I know that people think they're awfully modern, and emancipated," she said, "going to see such plays. But if they only do harm——"

"Which I don't agree that they do," Louis interrupted, rather warmly.

"They do!" Adela became suddenly defiant. Her eyes glittered; her nostrils were drawn.

"How d'you know? You've never seen one. And to whom?"

"They do! I can't tell you; but I know they do. I mean, I can't tell you, because you're a man. But they aren't nice, and they do a tremendous lot of harm to weak silly girls . . . and young men."

"But I'm not weak and silly." Louis did not want to continue the wrangle; but his rather obstinate nature forced him to a mild protest. He was not at all petulant. "Really, I'm not."

Adela shrugged. Her whole face sparkled with animation, with anger.

"You're very young," she said bitingly. "If you were older, you'd think differently." She seemed quite unlike herself, not the calm Adela of Beckwith legend, but another girl who had extreme difficulty in restraining her anger.

"But——" Louis was beginning; when Adela, apparently carried beyond control, suddenly bent her head, crimsoned, bit her lip, and hurried from the room. Louis saw her go with astonishment. He looked at Veronica, who had laid down her crochet and was regarding him. Veronica was smiling in a strange way.

"Where's she gone?" Louis asked.

"Upstairs . . . to cry," Veronica dryly told him. "I wondered how long it would be before that happened."

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "I'm so very sorry. Was I rude?"

"No," Veronica said, with a repetition of her curious smile. "Only silly. And Adela's always hysterical like that. Didn't you know?"

iv

There was such a curious triumph in her expression, although she seemed to be trying to hide it, that Louis was still more astonished than he had been.

"I wouldn't have persisted," he cried, "if I'd guessed that I was worrying her. I didn't *want* to talk about that. I thought it might interest her. The plays *do* interest me . . . I mean, I'm curious to see them; and I don't see why Adela should mind."

Veronica came closer to him. Her elbow almost brushed against his.

"Don't worry," she said. "I shouldn't." Then, with an astounding change, a change which, with her lowered voice, gave him a shock of familiarity with another side

of her nature, she went on: "It's not only the plays . . . Besides, everybody knows they're . . . Oh, well, Louis, you're awfully dense; and perhaps it's just as well. Now I suppose I've got to play your accompaniments."

She moved towards the piano, and picked up his songs, grimacing over them. They certainly were not very modern. He was thrilling with admiration of her prettiness and a sort of excitement at her last words. Still more at the tone, the movement, which had given him a sense of their intimacy. Veronica looked at him over her shoulder.

"If you want to know," she said, still in that low voice, "Adela's upset—we *all* are—about . . . the new people. And you, and your father and mother. We know how beastly it is for you. I'm really very sorry about it. It's so uncomfortable." There was a curious note of falseness in her sympathetic voice.

"D'you mean our cousins?" Louis asked, mystified. Veronica frowned quickly.

"Don't call them that!" she protested.

"But they *are*! What's the harm in it?" That seemed to bring her up sharply. She looked at him to see how far from genuine was his bravado. He could see that she was puzzled, as though she had made up her mind that his attitude would be different—or had made up her mind to pretend that his attitude *must* be different.

"You *are* funny!" she said at last. "I should have thought you'd be awfully waxy about them." Her soft voice was a flattery, cajoling him into acceptance of the Hughes view. Louis did not budge.

"Have you been to the shop yet?" he demanded.

"No. Rather not! Miss Lampe's been telling us all about them. There are two young ones, you know. A boy, and a stuck-up girl . . . horribly ugly . . ."

"Oh!" cried Louis swiftly. "Nobody could call her ugly!"

Veronica stared at him open-mouthed.

"You've seen her?" she exclaimed. Her surprise made Louis cautious.

"Why not?" he demanded in return, facing her down with an imperious determination.

"Oh, but Louis! It's too dreadful! Really, it is! The whole town's in a stir about them! Coming here and setting up shop. . . . And Miss Lampe says the girl insulted her over the counter!"

Louis laughed at the picture. He could imagine such a scene. Miss Lampe!

"What had Miss Lampe been doing?" he asked.

"Oh, I know she's an old tabby. But still . . . people like that!"

Their eyes met; and Louis was smiling, so that Veronica turned quickly away. She seemed to him to be still more puzzled, a little angry with him.

"You know, you make me a terrific Socialist when you talk like that," he said earnestly—really in a friendly way, and not at all as he had spoken hitherto. "I think it's a nuisance that they should have come; but they're very decent. . . . And after all it's no business of Miss Lampe's . . ."

"Or mine!" Veronica suddenly cried. "I suppose that's what you mean."

"Look here . . . I've had one row this evening, with Adela," Louis wisely said. "I don't want to be left alone altogether . . ." She looked at him demurely, almost archly.

"I'm tougher than Adela," she remarked. "So you needn't be afraid. Still, perhaps we'd better have some music. Or you'll think we're a quarrelsome family. Perhaps you do already. Do you?"

"A little ready to get excited about things that don't interest you much," he suggested.

Without answering, Veronica seated herself at the piano. It was not until she had struck several chords, and taken the uppermost song from Louis's meagre collection, that she spoke again. Then:

"What *sort* of girl is she?" asked Veronica in a critical voice—as if she hadn't made up her mind!

V

But such a question was too much for Louis. He had a very distinct impression of his cousin; but he was not at all prepared to describe her to anybody. Least of all, to Veronica.

"I couldn't say," he said. "I admit I didn't like her much; but I'm sure she isn't ugly. She's very dark, and I think she's got a good deal of expression. No, I'm sure she's not ugly."

"How old?" Veronica's face had quite changed; but he could only see half of it.

"Nineteen, twenty? I couldn't say. She's not very tall. Her hair's up."

"Silly boy! That's nothing. Miss Lampe said she was twenty-five . . . and a bad complexion—swarthy, like a gipsy. I don't expect you could see her. Was it in the daytime you saw her?"

"No. I admit it was at night."

"Ah, well! Besides, I don't expect you could tell—anyway."

"I wish I'd known you were likely to ask me," Louis ventured, with deliberate resentment; "I'd have made sure of all the details for you."

"Oh, you needn't worry! I'm not interested in her. I only wondered what she was like . . . and what you

thought of her. Still, it's not nice for you to have them coming here. I shouldn't like it if . . ."

Veronica broke off. The break made what she had been going to say more significant than it would have been if the sentence had been completed. She struck further chords upon the piano. As they resembled those indicated in the music before her Louis assumed that she had played the prelude; and by starting lustily to sing his song forced Veronica from her questionings into his accompaniment. By the time the song was finished, both Mrs. Hughes and Adela had reappeared in the room. Louis turned to look at Adela. In appearance she was quite as usual. There was no suggestion of the late storm, or of any discomposure, as far as his inexperienced eye could judge. In Mrs. Hughes there was only a kind of determined benevolence, behind which anything might lie, from stupidity to tyranny. But Adela was to him the mystery! Her sudden exit, the cool, scornful remarks of Veronica . . . And this ordinary calm in such a hasty reappearance. What was the explanation of it? What strange girls the girls of Beckwith were! They were so tough, and so superficially emotional, that they played perpetual April. They seemed to live for excitement, and to make it for themselves, out of nothing. He was truly puzzled. So he sang another song, in response to their entreaties.

"We couldn't resist the song!" said Mrs. Hughes. And then, when the second one was finished, she turned to Adela. "Sing that new one of yours, dear," she added. "The one about the flowers and the birds. I'm so fond of it."

Veronica rose from the piano at these words. Her work was over for the moment.

"Oh, Vera! You *are* a beast!" Adela cried. "You might play it for me!"

"Tired!" Veronica explained, grimacing.

Adela seated herself and played her own accompaniment, making mistakes in it. When she had finished the song she left the piano, tossing aside her music and sinking limply into a chair. Her face was not at this moment very agreeable; but Louis felt sympathetic towards her, and so he praised the song.

"Vera knows I can't play and sing at the same time," Adela said.

"You *try* very hard," put in Veronica in rather a challenging voice. "That's so devoted of you!"

"Pig!" Adela cried, laughing. "That's what you are!"

"Oh! Oh!" cried Mrs. Hughes. "There's a thing!"

They were all laughing at such a little battle. Louis would have laughed also if he had not caught the glance which Adela sent hurtling over to Veronica. It made him jump, it was so full of hatred. It was as though a battle had been going on of whose progress he had been unaware. He was quite unable to probe the mystery; he was completely baffled. But he was sure that there was hatred between them.

CHAPTER VII: AN ENCOUNTER

i

THE recollection of Adela, whose curious behaviour caused him a good deal of concern, and of Miss Lampe's description of Dorothy as ugly, recurred to Louis several times during the days that followed. They came to him always as little fleeting absurdities, and made him grin. He grinned, however, with a good deal of shrewdness, and not altogether from enjoyment. In Miss Lampe's condemnation he read the ready partisan comment so usual in Beckwith, because it took so little to make opinions grotesque in the town. Everything—from girls to books—was so quickly dismissed as "nice," "not nice," "nasty," "ugly," "unnecessary." A thing "not nice" was also "unnecessary." "One doesn't want to have unpleasant things mentioned," "Of course one knows it's true, but it's *so* unnecessary," "One wants to be taken away from the sordid realities of life," and so on, were cries constantly raised. A thousand false issues were raised. Because Dorothy had not received Miss Lampe with becoming humility she was "not nice," she was "unnecessary"; she had become "ugly." He had no doubt that she had become "immodest," and even "odd." . . .

Adela's sudden abandonment to tears—the tears of somebody quite tough, Louis assured himself, who had allowed her temper to conquer her for a few moments—was a curious phenomenon. There was also her quarrel,

simmering through the whole evening, with Veronica. Veronica had somehow triumphed over Adela, and Adela was sore. He tried to understand that, and tried to remember her of old, so as to find a key to her character. He could only recall her as the juvenile minx, dishonest and flirtatious, with a great deal more knowledge of boys, and perhaps even of "fellows," than was good for her. It was hard to reconcile the prim Adela of to-day with such early maturity as she had shown. Yet it gave him a subtle horror of her to think of those old days. It made her seem to him a prude, hiding base knowledge under a false shocked modesty.

Had Veronica been as she? The thought was abhorrent to him. He so much wanted to shut his mind to any thought of her that affected his admiration and his budding love that he could not bear to face his own doubts. If he had dared to force that veil of his own delicacy he would have had to account for the mixture in her of real innocence an inquisitive ignorance with, upon some subjects, her quite definite but concealed sophistication. She had, he instinctively knew, a hard underlying contempt for sensitiveness in a man—really, for inexperience. He knew that to betray timidity before her would be fatal. Weakness of any kind would make her ruthless, but even such a minor timidity as the kind of idealistic chivalry of the sensitive young man would arouse her contempt. To keep her love one would need to preserve one's "manliness." That was sophistication, surely? He remembered that he had once seen her watching the struggles of a bleeding bird, which had been horribly maimed by some accident. She had watched it, fascinated, had tried to prevent him from killing it; and then, seeing that his face had paled with the passionate sympathy—the horror—he had felt, she had been as full of callous surprise as any sportsman

could have been. She had despised him, and thought him a muff. That was another odd reminiscence. It came rushing into his mind. How he had argued with her! He had tried to show her that hatred of pain for others was not necessarily a weakness: Veronica had been unconvinced. She had looked at him with scorn. He had hated her. He had said—he was then thirteen—that he was afraid of nothing. He had thrust his hand, to prove it, into a prickly hedge, withdrawing it all bleeding and covered with thorny points. She had held her head high, outwardly scorning him; but she had been impressed. In passing cows she had clung to his arm; and he had whistled and walked slowly. No: that was something different. She had enjoyed the spectacle of the tortured bird. It was not his courage she had questioned, but his hardness. Even in remembering the scene Louis trembled with quick anger. Sex-hatred arose in his heart. He could hate bitterly the sex that was so filled with a kind of insensitive cruelty. Men were cruel; but a sort of decency worked in them. They faced pain, and cared little for the pain of others; but few of them could have watched with such absorbed gloating the agonised flutterings of that bleeding bird. Even those would have been religious sensualists or men deformed. That a normal person should so gloat was surely a feminine peculiarity?

And then, "ugly"! What would Miss Lampe, that light of her sex, be guilty of saying after this? If Dorothy was ugly, Miss Lampe was—what? He saw Miss Lampe's thin face, her sharp mouth and long upper lip; he saw the squalid wrinkles in her skinny neck. Her tasteless dresses, her silly hasty prim walk; her bead-like eyes, bright, mean, watchful. And yet she was only absurd, only an occasion for smiles. She was not even fabulously comic, as some other Beckwith ladies

were. She was only absurd, like a dried leaf, contorted by the action of wind and sun, withered and barren; as useless as an old leaf and as bleached and shrivelled. Her mind was dead. Having no life of her own, she lived, like a Christian, for others; only her concern was not to sacrifice herself, but only to scrutinise the lives of other people. She was microscopic, meticulous. . . . Miss Lampe's motto, Louis felt, was: "Watch and pry!"

"Beastly woman!" he cried; and laughed aloud. "Poor Miss Lampe!" he added after a moment. "So humble and officious!" But as Louis thought of Miss Lampe he was restrained by no such scruple as he felt in considering Veronica. Miss Lampe was old, and exhausted. Veronica was young. Veronica, of all the girls he knew, alone had the power to move him. With her he was conscious of excitement, of a kind of dancing wonderment, and an unceasing curiosity. There was no end to Veronica's possibilities. Particularly as his mind became blurred when he thought of them.

ii

It was upon the following Sunday afternoon that Louis, walking for his delight, went far afield. He first walked south, down and up, along a beautiful road that was overhung with the bare arms of mighty trees. In summer, with its grassy borders and unbounded depths of thicket upon each side, this road was one for the marvelling eye. In the branches above one heard the sweet noises of the woodland, and at every turn lay the secret beauties of colour and form in bark and leaf and mould. Even in winter it was lovely, for the treeboles were still exquisite, and the crossings of the boughs and smaller branches made a tracery bewildering in its in-

tricacy. The wind came sharply through the wood, now so meagre. It was a bleak northern wind, but not so strong as to arouse the hushing and pattering of the lightly swaying branches. Everything was quiet. Louis's steps echoed sharply; his stick clicked upon the roadway. He walked easily and with elasticity, welcoming the breeze, observant and tranquil.

His idea being to follow this road and to leave it at a large fork a mile farther on, he gave little heed to what lay before him, more distantly upon his way. It was not until he neared the fork, which would bring him round once again, by a circuit of three miles, to the neighbourhood of Beckwith, that Louis became aware of two figures standing in perplexity at the parting of the ways. Then, as he neared the two, he was puzzled to account for their familiarity, until it flashed into his mind that they were William and Dorothy. William had turned back to ask for directions. Louis waited with some amusement for recognition; and it was a pleasure to see how William's face lighted up.

"Why, Louis!" he cried. "The very man!" They shook hands. Louis looked beyond William, into the rather gloomy face of Dorothy. How little pleased she seemed at this encounter! Her greeting was courteous—which was an improvement, Louis thought!—but it was not cordial. She had evidently wanted to be alone with her father.

"This is the road," Louis explained. "At least, the way I was going."

"Couldn't be better! Now, tell us all about the neighbourhood, Louis. I suppose you know it like the back of your hand, as one may say."

Spurred by this confidence, Louis enlarged upon the features of the district. He pointed his arm, he indicated directions, distances, rural features, landmarks,

with all the gusto of a proprietor and with something less than the stereotyped facetiousness of a professional guide. He grew eloquent. From the district he turned to the place, to the growth of its housing accommodation, the railway, the shops, the people, and the houses. From the inhabitants in general he turned to the inhabitants in particular, of whom he knew the majority. He described them, and told of things they had done; his portraits were directed to William's eye, and not at all to Dorothy's amusement. He talked for William—not for Dorothy, who walked quietly beside him, intently listening, but with an air of indifference. Louis did not care very much whether she listened or not, but he confirmed his impression of her good looks by unobtrusive glances. She was, there could be no doubt, extremely pretty in a rather odd and baffling way. She was so dark that relationship between them seemed to be proclaimed —even a nearer relationship than there was in fact; but the unusual cut of her clothes set her apart again. She was clearly a Londoner, careless of what was thought of her by strangers. She looked like a tidy art-student. Her arms hung naturally, without constraint or overswing. She walked well. She walked better than most of the girls in Beckwith, who shuffled or clumped; and her clothes apparently fitted her better, since her skirt was the same distance from the ground at all points, and her overcoat was smart. Her hat Louis did not like. Even to him it seemed rather peculiar. He could not take his eyes off it for several seconds after the first glimpse. It had red berries upon it, and it was green. If her complexion had been less clear the hat would had given her face a grey appearance; but Dorothy had the most delicately beautiful complexion Louis had ever seen. One thing he liked: she did not let her hair cover her ears, perhaps because they were very charming ears.

It was drawn back from her temples, but not too scrupulously, and it was almost black hair, fine and luxuriant. On the whole Louis was pleased with his girl cousin's superficial aspect. He was pleased to feel himself walking by her side. William also pleased him by his eagerness and attention, and by his recognition of all that he was meant to recognise. There was something flattering in William's attentiveness. If it had not been for a few saving characteristics in himself and the consciousness of difficult corners in Dorothy, Louis would have been so pleased with himself and his company as to reach the fringe of complacency. That ghastly accident fortunately did not occur. And if it did not, then perhaps the unperturbed behaviour of Dorothy was responsible. Every now and then Dorothy also stole a glance at Louis. Her expression of gloom diminished during his recital. She remained rather non-committal still; but she was not bored. Louis could tell that. He was not at all afraid of her. He was even rather kind to her, until he saw her eyes flash and her mouth harden. No: kindness was not the proper line, decided Louis. It was even worse than disdain. So he cast aside all vanity and calculation, and became natural towards her. In five minutes he had seen her smile, had seen her throw at William a little quick radiant comment, unspoken but readable. And still Louis was checked in his complacency. There was some quality in her that forbade complacency. It was self-reliance. Dorothy did not speak; but if Louis regarded her he saw that one reason why Beckwith would not receive his cousin to its bosom was that she had a mind of her own. Dreadful possession!

iii

In Beckwith people do not have minds of their own. That is why Beckwith society is so extremely pleasant and consistent. It is devout and it is worldly. All the Beckwithians are devout and worldly. Louis quickly guessed that Dorothy was neither. She was not at all devout, because she had been brought up to take nothing on trust. She was amused at the idea of anybody taking things on trust. But she did not strike Louis as being worldly, either. She did not seem to want to know who and what people were, or in what esteem they were held. At least, she did not show any interest in that aspect of social life. She did not seem very much to want to know whether they were agreeable or disagreeable. When Louis, bred to observe social differences, alluded to some particular pretension, Dorothy did not laugh, but, instead, she frowned; and he felt that she was criticising him for being a snob. That made him sensitive, in case she should think that he had expressed his own opinion, when in reality he had only been illustrating the tone of Beckwith. There was a kind of address about her, he decided, that was in harmony with her strange hat. What *was* it she wanted to know about people? Not their incomes, nor their origins, nor their callings or social ambitions; not whether one "ought" to know them or about them. She gave no sign of her particular solvent. Perhaps she hadn't got one! Well, in that case, taking every person on his or her merits, she couldn't be worldly. She must be just a child. Could a child have such decided opinions? Dorothy aggravated Louis. She piqued him. She was a silly, arrogant, opinionated girl who knew nothing at all about life. He would not trouble about her. He

would forget her. And all the time, he was wondering what lay behind—what she *really* thought. It was his own problem rising once more: the mysteriousness of human demeanour. What was he looking for himself? Yes; but Dorothy had no right to be so masculine. As a man he resented it. The grievance came back to the first point: she thought she could think and see for herself. She had a mind of her own. It exasperated him to feel that he had not the remotest idea of what that mind was teaching her to believe about Louis Vechantor. He could only guess that it was something unfavourable. The thought of being summed up with disfavour could never be pleasant to anybody still young and self-conscious; but to Louis any such estimate on the part of Dorothy was a gross misreading of his character. She couldn't know anything about him: she was going right off the line, and the fatal impression was being strengthened by his very efforts to rectify her mistake. Irritating little thing! thought Louis. She's conceited. . . . Why can't she say something, so that I can contradict her?

iv

Louis had never cared so much before to "put himself right." If he had been less well-bred he would have challenged her directly, or even would have ventured into self-exposition. He was restrained, however, by his politeness and his sense of the ridiculous. He must leave it to time to rehabilitate him in her eyes. If it were worth while that he should be rehabilitated. Perhaps it wasn't, after all . . .

"Down that hill, where you can just see a bridge crossing the road, is the house of a lady who watches over Beckwith," he remarked, taking advantage of place to

divert his own thoughts. "She isn't a very rich lady, but she lives alone in a small house built very near the road. And she knows everybody and everything in Beckwith. I'm almost afraid to whisper a word about her, for fear she hears it."

"Have you ever been inside her house?" asked Dorothy.

"Not inside—no. But as you go by you feel the curtain moves. She has very dense lace curtains; but I think she must stand very close against them."

"Pious?" asked William abruptly.

"Very. Oh, very! She sets a good example to the whole town."

"I thought so," William admitted. "I don't like pious people. They're never quite straight."

"Really . . . really . . ." Louis was exceedingly interested in such a suggestion. It made him fall naturally into one of the ways familiar in Beckwith for the eliciting of further detail.

"I expect Louis is very religious himself," Dorothy said. "So you'd better . . ."

"Oh, present company . . . present company . . ." added William quickly.

"What makes you think I'm religious?" demanded Louis.

"You're so uncharitable," she answered. Louis demurred. "Well, you don't get angry with stupid people; you say little malicious things about them . . ." Dorothy explained.

"Oh; but I'm told a religious person never *says* malicious things. He only thinks them. That's very different," explained Louis. "Beckwith makes me angry; only I feel it's no good getting angry. It's only stupid people who lose their tempers, and that's because they haven't any knowledge to ground their arguments on. They just *have* to shout. Now, I never shout."

Dorothy's lip curled.

"No. I suppose you think it's bad form," she said dryly.

V

What could one do but snap one's fingers in exasperation? Louis looked at William, and William looked at Louis. That exchange renewed the peace that Dorothy's words might have broken. If Louis had been resolute to take offence that speech of hers would have separated them more effectively than any Beckwithian outside effort could have done. But Louis was not conceited—or not very conceited—so he took her rebuke in good part.

"I do, rather," he admitted coolly. "Don't you?"

There was no answer; and he knew that she was very ashamed of herself, for having been unforgivably rude.

"She doesn't mean what she says!" cried William, with a quick turn. "There's nobody kinder than our little Doll. It's mere bumptiousness, you know. Nothing behind it."

"I know," murmured Louis.

A very faint colour came into Dorothy's cheeks. Louis saw her mouth open as if she were beginning to speak; but no words came, and the effort was clearly too much for her. He felt almost magnanimous. He was presently rewarded by the knowledge that Dorothy glanced quickly aside at him, and then, finding that he did not seem to be conscious of the fact, prolonged her scrutiny.

CHAPTER VIII: IN THE TRAIN

i

A FEW days later, Louis, absorbed during the afternoon by exacting work, was very late for his homeward-bound train. He had an exciting run to London Bridge station, and was only allowed to slip through the barrier at the risk of losing the tails of his overcoat. This hurry, and the fact that he boarded the train after it had begun to move from the platform, confused him at the moment of entering the last compartment, and for some seconds he sat breathing hard, recovering his composure. Only when he had slightly cooled after such violent exertion did he look round the carriage.

It was a third-class smoking compartment, and besides himself there were four people in it. Three men sat with their backs to the engine, out of the draught,—one a middle-aged clerk, another a stout, rather oily railwayman, the third a nondescript who was probably in the building trade. Louis felt himself in very democratic company. The fourth person was upon his left, in the corner seat facing the engine. Louis had passed her in getting into the carriage; and it was not until he was in full possession of his breath that he noticed a girl's presence. His eyes went first to the book she was reading—it seemed, of all books in the language, to be a volume of Boswell's "Johnson,"—and then to her face. To his surprise, this studious reader was his cousin Doro-

thy. She was absorbed in her book, and he would have thought that she had not seen him, or at least not recognised him, if he had not observed with surprise that a faint colour of embarrassment was coming into her cheeks as she read.

"It can hardly be anything in the book that is making her blush," Louis said to himself. "As far as I remember, at any rate: so it clearly must be that she doesn't know what to do. Perhaps she thinks I may not want to recognise her. I suppose I *do?* It's now or never. . . . Oh, of course, I *must*! It's absurd! Or doesn't *she* want to recognise me? Oh, I ought to have thought that first, instead of the other way about. I'm a snob —a snob. A Vechantor, in fact! And I ought to be made to feel it. . . ."

"Excuse me, cousin Dorothy," said Louis, cutting short his ridiculous soliloquy and raising his hat; "I've only just recognised you."

ii

Dorothy looked up from Boswell's "Johnson" as though she had been surprised by his voice.

"Oh!" she valiantly said, pretending that she had not seen him. The pretence did not deceive Louis for an instant. Dorothy did not pretend very well: she had not had very much practice in social affairs.

"I'm so glad to see you," Louis went on, pretending in his turn to be more sure of himself than he really was. "I've had such a run for this train; and the next one isn't until a quarter-to-six. Do you catch this train as a rule, or have you just been to town for the afternoon?"

"Only to-day," Dorothy said shyly. He could tell that she did not want to talk. She cast a lingering look at Boswell's "Johnson." Louis thought she was very likely hating the laws of politeness, which make it necessary

that slight acquaintances should stumble to talk to each other in accidental railway meetings, instead of going on with their real interests. He racked his brain to think of a topic, because he was now determined to break down her disinclination for him.

"Are you comfortably settled yet? At home, I mean?"

"Yes, thank you," Dorothy vouchsafed, with a full stop. She did not employ suspensory dots, as our modern novelists so freely do in conversation.

"And the people nice to you?"

That kindled her. He saw the indignant flash of her eyes in that pale face. She changed instantly from the Dorothy of their first meeting, who had been sullen, to the Dorothy of the walk, who had attracted him.

"Beastly!" she cried. "They've been trying to find out all about us."

Louis nodded.

"Of course, they were bound to. That's what they always do. But it won't continue."

He was trying to reassure her; but his words made Dorothy's lip curl in an unpleasant manner.

"No," she remarked dryly. "It won't."

Again that full stop! Louis was filled with concern, for her speech was sinister.

"You haven't spoken to them . . . as you did to me," he hoped. The memory came to him of something Veronica had said. Something about an insult to Miss Lampe. "They wouldn't all understand as well as I did. Have you?"

Dorothy was constrained. She looked at the clerk in the opposite corner, who was listening hard, trying to hear what was said, in these low voices, scenting an intrigue, even a quarrel, and full of that righteous moral curiosity in these affairs which respectable English people feel in any conversation between two young people.

It is the moral police instinct. He had the face of one tempted and critical and self-complacent; of one who represents Society as against the philandering instinct.

Dorothy answered at last.

"When they began to be inquisitive . . ." she began, and hesitated. Louis helped her.

"It's all they've got to live for," he explained. "Of course, it's sometimes inconvenient."

"It makes me savage," Dorothy said. "I expect I've been short with them. In fact I know I have." Then, grimly, she added: "Still, they've found out a good deal. They've found out that mother does her own washing, and that I make the beds. . . . Where we came from, and what our names are; and . . . Oh, it's disgusting. I expect you know them all. I wish you'd make them understand how *ugly* they are!"

Ugly! That was the word Miss Lampe had used in describing Dorothy! Of course Miss Lampe must have meant morally ugly! Just as Dorothy did! Louis had an extraordinary feeling.

"You don't think I'm as ugly as they are?" Louis asked interestedly. Dorothy did not reply. If they had been alone in the carriage she might have done so. She might even have been rude, Louis thought, with a sinking of the spirits. Perhaps he was, in that sense, ugly? He went on: "I've known them—in a way—all my life. I've known their faces, and their voices. I don't really like them, of course—I can't think of anybody doing that;—but I suppose when you're used to them . . ."

"You belong to their class," Dorothy said candidly. "To you it's natural . . . It's the kind of thing you're used to. It's new and horrible to me. To find it the *only* way people look at things. You couldn't feel as I do."

"I do, rather." Louis was for a moment thoughtful.

He added: "You've always been a little unfair to me, haven't you!"

"No. I haven't." He saw that she was suffering from that quick shame which a sense of her brusqueness sometimes roused. The colour was again beginning to steal into her cheeks. He felt a further leap of interest in her. How candid she was! All the same, she had always been unfair to him.

"Yes," Louis persisted. "We won't argue about it before these men, because it would amuse them, and very likely they would go home and tell their wives, and that opens up such a prospect of aimless scandal that I'm frightened to think about it. . . . But it's quite true that when I came to call that night I acted on a good impulse, and I only wanted to be friendly, and helpful, and . . . and cousinly, you know. I was dreadfully nervous, though I don't expect you could tell that. . . . You see, I didn't expect to see anybody but your father. To come on a whole group of you . . ."

"Like a nest of mice," Dorothy said brusquely.

"Or like a family of cousins," he retorted, with equal quickness.

"I don't think I'm awfully keen on cousins," said Dorothy.

Louis turned upon her.

"*Don't* say you've got more of them!" he begged, in a state of alarm. "What an awful thought!"

"There are . . . my mother's people. They're little grocers, in country villages. But their name's Hopkins . . ." She had been going to say "Mum's people," and that impulse, showing that she really accepted their relationship, in spite of her first determination not to do so, was extraordinarily pleasant to Louis.

"Many of them? Are they nice?" he asked with

interest. Her face, which had been bright, darkened at such a question. He hardly heard her next words.

"You're like our customers," she was murmuring, but with a shy, rather child-like half-smile.

"I wish you wouldn't keep on thinking that," he urged. "It wasn't inquisitiveness that made me ask."

As Louis spoke the train, with a jerk that shot everybody forward in their seats, drew up at a station. Two of their fellow-passengers got out. The third, hesitating, thought he would be more comfortable in another carriage. He was not the moral special-constable; but another kind of man, who felt a shyness at playing gooseberry to the private negotiations of a courting-couple. He plunged out of the carriage after his fellows. As the carriage was the last in the train (and as front carriages and final carriages are always avoided in case of collision), no other passengers appeared; and the cousins were alone together. So Louis re-modelled his protest, and felt exhilarated at the notion that Dorothy would now be able to be as rude as she wished. He even stretched his legs slightly, across the floor of the carriage.

"Everything's a question of motive," he said. "If you've got the mind of a patent carpet-sweeper, you can be very objectionable. I know that. I hate people who are inquisitive about me, or about my affairs. But I'm not really like the customers. I do wish you'd believe that. I'm really quite decent. . . . But you see I never knew you existed, until now; and to me it would be most awfully interesting—on that account—to hear details about you all."

Dorothy closed her book definitely, and looked out of the window for a moment.

"I didn't really want to talk to you when you got in," she said slowly. "Only I didn't want to be rude."

"I knew you didn't," Louis admitted. "And I didn't

want to . . . thrust myself on you. Still, we *are* cousins; and I shouldn't have thought I'd done anything that deserved a snub."

"A snub!" Dorothy cried. "Oh, it's not that!"

"I've never pretended to be any better than you . . ." he said, rather hurt.

"Haven't you, just a little? Just in trying to be kind to us?" At his demur, she went on: "I should have thought there was a pleasure in it; and just because we're cousins you feel we ought to like each other. I hate cousins. I don't want any. I don't want any relations. . . . They're only a nuisance."

"They *can* be," he agreed. "I quite admit. But why should I be? I should have thought you'd be curious about me. I mean, I'm somebody young, that you know nothing at all about. I'm curious about you. I know your name, and that you read—for some reason—Boswell's 'Johnson.' But that's everything. Except, of course, that you're very quick-tempered and sensitive."

Dorothy was so surprised that she looked at him, as he had meant her to do.

"Well!" she exclaimed, as if aghast at his audacity in showing some judgment.

"Why shouldn't we be friends?" Louis urged. "Perhaps I can help you."

"I don't want any help."

Louis sighed. What could one reply to such childlike rudeness?

"I think you're rather difficult to get on with," he announced in a helpless tone.

iii

But by his frontal attack upon her Louis had strongly awakened Dorothy's interest in him. So much was clear

from the colour in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes. She even gave a little laugh, that was only half due to exasperation. Louis, turned to her, and watching for some key to her character, saw the change and heard the laugh with a feeling of relief. He laughed slightly himself.

"For me," he said, "it's really jolly to have found a cousin. My sister's older than I am, and she's been married for so long that I hardly know her at all. She lives in Hertfordshire. Her name is Beatrice. And I can't help believing that cousins perhaps have something . . . some sort of similarity. Taste . . . and so on. Don't you think they have? Perhaps it's only a dream, because you're the only cousin I've talked to at all. I'm not like the people at Beckwith. Really, I'm not. Nor is my mother, I think. I want you to know her. If you'll help me I can manage it quite easily. But if you're going to stand on your dignity, and refuse to be friendly, we shall never get the two families knowing each other. It's only a kind of vanity . . . or something . . . that makes people frightened of taking the first step. They're afraid—*you're* afraid—of taking the first step, in case the others don't respond, and you get a rebuff. You can't stand rebuffs."

"And you won't *take* them!" cried Dorothy, flaming.

"I'm really very afraid of you," Louis answered. "But it doesn't do to show it."

"Nobody would guess!" Dorothy interrupted, before he had qualified his first assertion.

"I wish you *would* guess; and admire my self-control," urged Louis. "You see, you're putting me in the position of somebody you dislike, who's forced himself on you. You're making me seem a cad. But you don't want to do that, do you?" He was appealing to her. It was not without effect.

"If I thought . . . *that* . . . I should get out at the next station," Dorothy said. "Or tell you to. I don't feel that at all now. I feel you *are* my cousin. I don't like you, of course . . ."

"No. I don't like you very much, either," Louis remarked, since it had come to that.

Dorothy flinched, and flushed. Then she laughed, her eyes gleaming a little with pain.

"Don't you?" she said. "I didn't suppose you did. Why should you? I expect you think it's your duty to talk to me. To show me the way I ought to go. Like that awful woman at Beckwith."

Louis whistled. He felt that he was upon the verge of a discovery.

"Was it Miss Lampe?" he asked. "Or Mrs. Callum?"

"I don't know. They all look alike, to me. If it was one of two I expect Miss Lampe. She asked me what religion I was. I said I was a Mormon. She left a tract. She wanted subscriptions for half a dozen charities."

"Miss Lampe," said Louis. "That's her line. Mrs. Callum's is funds."

"She was a very stupid woman."

"Oh, that's no help to me," Louis admitted. "But if it was charities it was Miss Lampe. You must be very careful of her. She's a dangerous woman. She knows all about everybody in Beckwith. She sees everything. She is the one who lives at that house near the station. That I told you about, you know. I think it must be furnished with telescopes; for nothing goes on in Beckwith that she doesn't know almost before everybody else. Of course, in Beckwith everybody knows everything sooner or later. It's only a question of time. But this is a warning. Whatever you do, don't let Miss Lampe

have an opportunity of making mischief about you."

"I'm not afraid of anybody," Dorothy said, with her head high. "Miss Lampe or anybody else."

"You would be, if you knew her," warned Louis. "I'm not joking."

"A spy like that!" Dorothy said incredulously.

"In a place like Beckwith. I assure you. She's malicious. Don't you remember what we said? I showed you her house, near the station."

Louis spoke so seriously that Dorothy's first vanity, her contempt of what seemed unworthy, was shaken. She began to remember forgotten truth. Her colour diminished. She nodded quickly, now fully alive to the danger which he was striving to bring home to her.

"Miss Lampe," she said. "I'll remember. And she hates me already."

iv

Thereafter they began to talk with more friendliness. Louis thought that Dorothy had forgotten her first suspicions of him, for she was completely at ease, and as she had no affectation whatever, but only a touchiness born of hatred of shops and hatred of those who patronised shop-keepers, Dorothy was a very nice companion. The hat which he had thought odd had disappeared. Perhaps it was only a hat for country walks on Sunday. She was dressed inconspicuously, in a deep crimson coat with an astrakhan collar, and her hat was black with deep crimson decoration. This combination of colour suited very well her complexion. It heightened the refinement of her face. When that face was not expressing disapproval it seemed to Louis very pretty indeed. Upon further scrutiny, Dorothy was evidently not more than twenty or twenty-one. Her conversation proclaimed her

youthfulness; as did her readiness to be offended. In two or three years she would learn to ignore or to despise stupidity: at present it still had power to anger her. But Louis felt that if she had been two or three years older he might have found it more difficult to make her accept his friendship as the result of a casual meeting in the train.

"If I offer to come round one evening," he ventured, "you won't say now that I'm not to come. Will you?" Dorothy did not hesitate. She looked at him with frank interest.

"No," she said. Her cheeks began faintly to glow, to redden. Her lips parted. Her expression softened. Then: "I hope you'll try and forget how rude I was."

"That's splendid!" exclaimed Louis, all alight with such candour. Rather awkwardly, he went on: "I say, do you mind also forgetting what I said about not liking you? It wasn't true. I only said it because I was rather irritated at what you said. I didn't mean it."

Dorothy looked suddenly pleased. Her embarrassment had subsided. She too sparkled.

"I'm so glad!" she said. "I *meant* mine; but I don't mean it any longer."

"Well—we're all right now?" he asked. "Will you shake hands?"

As they shook hands the train drew up at the Beckwith station. They walked together along the platform. Louis knew that Dorothy saw old Tonks, the ticket-collector, touch his hat to him; and he imagined her squirm of impatience at the feudal note. But he was pleased to observe how well she walked. It was as though she were perfectly elastic, but also without self-consciousness. Those Beckwith girls who did not trip along without any character at all swung their arms and moved their shoulders, to show how much at ease they were. Doro-

thy walked as though she did not think about her motions. Looking aside at her, Louis thought that she must be about the same height as Veronica. It was while he was thinking this, and eagerly regarding her, that they passed under the light just opposite Miss Lampe's house. Dorothy, looking up at him with the friendliest of smiles, said impulsively:

"I'm so glad we met to-day. It's made me feel quite different."

CHAPTER IX: VERONICA

i

HIS talk with Dorothy produced in Louis a curious revulsion of feeling. For him she was changed. She had become a tremendously desirable new friend. In a world where friends were so scarce the establishment of a new intimate relation was a notable event. If Dorothy liked him, as it appeared, there was no end to the interest such a friendship might provide. For one thing, she was very natural: as far as he could see she would always remain natural. He could imagine long interchanges of talk, in which he might find limitless new knowledges. Hitherto he had felt that friendship with a girl could not be very close, and could not last, without the arbitrary forcing of such friends into engagement and marriage. In Beckwith it is so. Three meetings, casual or planned; and, afterwards, eyebrows did their work. Either the girl was forced to abandon friendship, or she was forced to go beyond friendship. Friends became lovers or acquaintances. Why? He had never understood. It was because there was no social background. All the relations of the sexes were governed by general opinion. Seen alone together for a few times they must either announce an engagement or have it very actively canvassed. Sooner or later general opinion brought matters to a head. There were hints, blushes, self-consciousness for a few days, a ring or a break. It was the community that played providence. One had

duties, it was explained. Now Dorothy, Louis felt, was not like other girls in that respect. She was unconventional—she was what Miss Lampe and the servant-maids of Beckwith would call "rather fast." Louis was greatly pleased at such a recognition. She interested him.

Dorothy interested him. She seemed to Louis to be less like a girl than a human being. It gave him a rare delight to recognise a kindred spirit—to feel aware of a character to be explored. Yes; she was unusual. She had reserves; she was strangely frank. He remembered in a flash that reference to Daunton's Ethel, who had so contemptibly betrayed her sex by saying that she had never been loved before. Of course Dorothy would not say such a thing hysterically, as perhaps Ethel had done; but Louis was swept with the knowledge that she would tell him candidly what she thought and felt about a number of things never mentioned by Beckwith girls. She was not a hoarder; not a sentimental, callous girl-of-the-world. There was about her something real, something vital, that he could recognize and admire. She was almost like a man. She was altogether unlike Veronica Hughes.

How remarkable! Louis was struck again with the difference. She was somebody as unlike Veronica as the mind of man could conceive. Both, of course, were attractive; but how dissimilar! That brought him back to Veronica, whom he had momentarily forgotten in this new preoccupation with his girl-grocer cousin Dorothy. The next evening Louis went to call upon the Hughes family, because he wanted to see Veronica. He only wanted to see her. He dreaded meeting Mrs. Hughes; he felt a disinclination for Judith; and a persistent aversion from Adela. But after all this thought of Dorothy it had become a necessity to him to see Veronica.

Rather to his pleasure he found, upon reaching the

house, that Veronica was alone; and his carriage became more buoyant when this fact was announced by the maid. He was distinctly relieved. As he entered the drawing-room Veronica stood listlessly turning over some music which lay on the piano. His first thought was that she looked and felt tired, and then that her smile was slightly less cordial than usual. She cried "Hul-lo!" at seeing him, but her manner was constrained and without its general vividness; so that Louis's buoyancy was checked and his own mood appreciably lowered. A bright fire was burning; but the room was not fully lighted, and so it had a desolate air. A gloom seemed to be upon it, and Veronica's quietness was as much of a surprise as it was a disappointment. He had so counted upon her gaiety! This dispirited air was new and unwelcome. It was also infectious, for Louis began to feel at once a corresponding and embarrassing constraint.

"All the others out?" he asked, in a friendly way.

"Father's in," Veronica said. "In his room. I'm sure you'd like a chat with him. Wouldn't you?"

"He's probably asleep," guardedly explained Louis. "Shouldn't you think so?"

"Very likely. And anyway he's rather grumpy to-night because he put a penny in a machine for some matches and the matches scattered all over the platform."

Veronica spoke dryly, and was not amused at the accident. Louis was puzzled at her tone, and at the dull expression upon her face.

"It *is* those little things, of course," he admitted, sympathising with Mr. Hughes.

"Being a man," Veronica said. "I suppose it is. Poor dears! Mother and Adela are at the Corntofts'. I was going; but I had a headache."

"Real or diplomatic?" asked Louis. "I'm sorry you've got a headache, any way."

Veronica's blue eyes were fixed upon him. It was with such a strange expression, as she stood so quietly near him, that Louis felt almost uncomfortable, restless. He was puzzled. There was so much unsaid between them that he felt he had no clue to her feelings. She was a mystery, an exquisite mystery, unfathomable.

"Real, of course," Veronica answered, in rather a chilling voice. "Come and sit down by the fire." They sat, and she was almost immediately opposite to him. The fire flickered and the clock ticked. Outside everything was quiet. Only within, alone with Veronica, Louis touched an uneasy happiness, a constrained delight. He saw again with that pervasive thrill her exquisite prettiness, and the soft fair hair which he could imagine as like silk against his hand. As Veronica lay back in her chair, carelessly, with her legs crossed, the lifted skirt revealed her pretty ankles. Her whole attitude, if listless, was charming. It seemed that his heart softened, as though he were wholly filled with the sense of her beauty. He could not resist the encroachment of a languor similar to her own. When he spoke again it was in a gentler voice.

"Is the headache still bad?" he asked. "I hope it isn't. You'll tell me if you'd rather I didn't stay?"

Veronica's head was turned away. She was watching the light-flames rising from the fire.

"What have you been doing?" she countered, ignoring his suggestion. "Just working?"

"Practically nothing else," Louis admitted. "The beginning of the year is a terribly busy time with us. Though I'm feeling very lazy myself." They fell silent for a minute. "No; but are you really better?" he went on. Veronica moved restlessly. Her head was turned towards him, and then away again.

"Oh yes," she said impatiently. "It comes and goes.

I always have headaches. It makes me more interesting. You have to have something the matter with you; or you might get confused with somebody else."

"Only by somebody who didn't know you," he ventured. A slight grimace appeared upon Veronica's lips. Her tone had been half-serious, and Louis had been taking it as wholly bantering. He tried to cancel the bad impression. "Are the Corntofts amusing?" he questioned.

"Deadly!" she assured him. "Why, their one idea is to talk about their wretched kid."

"The little clarinetist? But I thought you liked her so much!"

"Did you?" Veronica's tone was perfectly listless. "She's all right . . ."

"But don't you remember . . . at your party. In telling me about her . . . "

"You're thinking of Adela, aren't you?" Veronica interrupted dryly. "She's always got a kind word to say of everybody. Everybody thinks she's so intelligent for seeing their good points—almost as well as they can themselves. If you want to know, I think the clarinet's a beastly instrument."

"Perhaps you don't always say what you think?" suggested Louis considerately, referring to her surprisingly unkind praise of Adela. Veronica made a tiny laughing noise that was not a laugh. She looked very far from mirth: there was a bitter sadness in her expression, lying beneath the air of apathy.

"Why don't you say what you mean?" she said. "That I'm a nasty little cat."

Louis did not answer that. He saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"I didn't mean *anything* unkind," he said. "Veronica! You can't suppose I did?"

"Can't I?" Veronica asked, as if it were innocently. "I suppose you'd know. Well, mother's very keen on Mrs. Corntoft; and the Corntofts have got a cousin who knows somebody who conducts an orchestra. And so Adela's been invited there to play accompaniments for Irene—and praise her—so that this cousin can see whether she's good enough to be introduced to his friend who conducts the orchestra. And then they'll make a child-marvel of her; and the Corntofts will go out of their minds with joy. Pretty prospect, isn't it!"

He was really distressed at her tone, which was pathetic in its strangely unkind flippancy.

"She's their transferred vanity," he said. "I expect they find her success a justification of their own lives." Veronica smiled satirically.

"How clever that sounds!" she said in a light voice. "Only I don't know what it means." She threw him a mocking glance. Her eyes were still bright, but he no longer feared that she was going to cry. He stumbled on.

"If the motive force of most people is vanity," he explained, "as I'm coming to believe it is;—the desire to push one's children must be a sort of indirect, or transferred . . . re-embodied . . . vanity."

That shocked her. He could see that Veronica was quite unready for such a doctrine. She was ready to repulse it with horror. In Beckwith one scratches, but one does not philosophise one's scratches, because that is cynicism. And cynicism, which has no respect for discretion, is in horribly bad taste. That was the cause of Veronica's instinctive recoil.

"What a beastly idea!" she cried. "And of course it's not true."

"You only mean, you don't like it," retorted Louis. "But it may be true, all the same."

"Louis, it *isn't* true." She sat up in her chair, her face quite alert, eyeing him with disapproval. "I think you're perfectly beastly to say such a thing. If you really believed things like that, what would be the good of life, and . . . and religion?"

Into Louis's mind there had come a curious fear; and at the same time a sort of confused happiness at her rebuttal of his theory. He was glad to find her so little cynical by conviction; but he was sorry to think that her refusal even to pass his notion without protest might be an indication of prudery.

"You think they're very good now?" he asked. Veronica shook her head.

"You oughtn't to talk like that," she protested. "It isn't nice. Besides, if they weren't any good . . . if people *didn't* believe in something they'd . . . they'd . . ." Her tongue could not find the words.

"I think they're vain," Louis said. "Besides, you don't want to believe in anything that isn't true . . . just in case it might be useful to believe in it. Do you? That's a very base kind of Christian utilitarianism."

"I don't know *what* you're talking about," Veronica said, with energy. "I only know it's beastly—and frightening. So don't talk about it any more, there's a good boy. You don't know anything at all about life; and you only get these horrid cynical ideas from other people. . . ."

Louis frowned. He was very exasperated at her tone of condescension.

"You always pretend I'm such a kid," he cried sharply. "I'm not. I've thought a good deal. I know what I'm talking about. But if you're frightened to think a thing, in case it might be rather unpleasant, you might just as well have no brains at all."

"Well, they only unsettle you," Veronica said. "And make other people unhappy."

The old air, momentarily distracted, of a curious sadness, returned to her. Louis was again puzzled. But he was snuffing the air, like a war-horse. The light of battle was in his eye. There is no means of knowing what specious arguments he might have used to support his views, if he had not noticed that Veronica's hand was trembling. That sight changed him instantly.

"Vera, old girl, what's the racket?" he asked in a quiet voice. "I won't argue if it makes you wretched; but you've been a bit miserable all the evening, so I don't think it can really be that. . . ."

"I'm quite all right. Nothing the matter. Silly boy!" Veronica said, in a curious dry voice.

"Sure?"

"Of course! Sit where you are! I don't want you fussing round me. I've got a cold coming on. That's all that's the matter." She was so defiant that she half convinced him.

"I'd just like to say this one thing," Louis said eagerly. "And no more. If you've got brains, and you use them, and that makes you think differently from other people, who haven't got so many brains, or who don't use them, are *you* in the wrong? Mightn't it be the others who are wrong?"

Veronica stared at him, incapable of answering so suspiciously simple a doubt.

"I don't know," she petulantly answered. "I know thinking makes you restless, and makes you do odd things; and that makes other people unhappy. So it *can't* be right." She was triumphant at least in that.

"Why, unhappy?" he begged.

"I suppose . . . because they like you," Veronica said.

Louis was astounded. Her voice had such a personal ring.

"Are you talking about *me?*" he asked. "Me!"

"Weren't you? I thought you were? I thought it was all your vanity!"

"Bad girl!" Louis cried. "Wicked girl! Besides, what I said had nothing to do with me."

"Hadn't it?" Veronica spoke indifferently. Then: "Louis, you really *oughtn't* to do what you've been doing," she startlingly began. "It makes it difficult all round. You ought to think of other people. You might know how silly it is. It's worried me—all of us—dreadfully." He was amazed. What, then, had he been doing that caused such distress?

"Exactly what is it," he begged, "that I've been misdoing? I don't remember anything specially bad."

Veronica looked away. He saw her raised foot moving nervously, as though she would have tapped it upon the floor. A frown appeared above her eyes and in her eyes.

"I suppose it doesn't occur to you . . ." she began. Then she shrugged. "Oh, never mind! If you won't bear in mind what it means to your real friends."

"To you?" he asked, his heart beating faster. "Do you mean, to you?"

"Yes." Veronica spoke very low. She was looking at him again, searchingly. Louis racked his brains to discover some fault that he might have committed. At last he shook his head.

"Sorry," he said quickly. "I wish I could think of some crime. But I can't. You may be sure I haven't meant to do anything that makes you—of all people—miserable. Is that the cause of the headache?"

"You *must* know," Veronica protested. "I mean, think of us, and . . . and everybody."

"Say it right out," he begged. "Tell me exactly what!"

Veronica, subdued, seemed also astonished at what she regarded as an evasion. When his face continued to express nothing but the most naïve bewilderment she shrugged her shoulders.

"Going about with that girl!" she at last declared, in a strange voice. "It's too bad of you!"

"That girl?" Louis thought. "Dorothy? My cousin?" How on earth had Veronica learned about that casual meeting? How had she been led to misread it and to exaggerate its significance? He was for a moment so completely baffled that he could not explain her obviously unfeigned concern.

Quickly, Louis remembered that Dorothy and he had passed within the ray of light opposite Miss Lampe's house. He whistled. A blank look came into his face.

ii

"I don't know what you mean by 'going about with her,'" he said at last. "I suppose you *do* mean my cousin? I've been 'going about' with nobody. But I met Dorothy one evening in the train, coming home. As I might have met you. I walked with her to the shop. And I suppose Beckwith watched us all the way from the station."

Veronica listened with a kind of horror.

"As you might have met *me!*" she cried. "Well!" She seemed unable to believe her ears. "D'you mean to say . . . Oh, Louis! You *are* an innocent!"

"I suppose it *was* Miss Lampe who hurried round Beckwith . . . charitably!" Louis said, his temper rising quickly. "How these people watch! But to think of *you* taking any notice of them!" He moved in his chair, unable to control the irritation which had seized him. "And what is it, after all? Because I met my cousin!"

"She's *not* your cousin!" Veronica exclaimed vehemently. "She's a shop-girl!"

"My father keeps a money-shop," Louis said. "Don't be so absurd! I'm ashamed of you."

"It's you that's absurd!" cried Veronica. "Money-shop, indeed! Whoever heard of it!"

"They're only ways of making a living! Chemist's shop and surgery, bank and grocery, coals and soap and oatmeal. Serendipity and salvation! Even old Toppett is paid!"

"Mr. Toppett! Oh, really, Louis!" Veronica, also agitated beyond bearing, rose to her feet. Louis followed her example. "You know it's wrong!" Veronica said breathlessly. "You're only blustering."

"And you're only being conventional!" Louis retorted. "You know that there's no harm in it. You'd talk to Dorothy, and admire her, too, if she lived somewhere else. You'd see that she's got brains, intelligence—honesty, which is more than Miss Lampe ever had. Mean, spying woman, who's got nothing better to do than backbite and spoil. She ought to be ashamed of herself. She's worse than Mrs. Daunton, because it's not her business."

Veronica was quite white. Her eyes seemed to have become black. She breathed with difficulty. Her hands were jerking; her face was averted, as though she could not hold her head straight because of the anger and distress that consumed her.

"I wonder . . . why it is . . ." she gasped, "that . . . common girls attract men so much!"

"Common girls!" Louis's voice was thick. "Dorothy! Why, she's a pearl in Beckwith. Miss Lampe feels her own inferiority! That's why she's so malicious about her. Now look here!" He tried to steady himself. "If Daunton's girl is straight, he's going to marry her. Why shouldn't he? If she's the kind of girl he wants. We're

not kings and queens, who have to marry the people chosen for them. We're human beings. We love by impulse."

"Oh! Oh!" cried Veronica, suffocated. "I hope . . . I hope you'll be happy. She's made sure of you, I see!"

Her hands were up to her face. Her body was shaken with the dreadful sobs which she could no longer control. But as Louis stepped towards her she moved quickly away, her arm extended to repel him. Louis, his mind overwhelmed with bitterness and chagrin, looked down at her, his fists clenched, his lips parted. He hated and despised her. She was contemptible to him.

"You think that!" he said at last, in a very low voice. "You say that!"

He slowly turned away, and towards the door. Veronica, drying her eyes, and blowing her nose, followed him, her head bent, stricken with panic.

"Louis!" she begged, in a thin wailing voice. "Don't go! Don't leave me!"

"I'm too angry!" Louis cried. "I can't stay. I can't bear to stay!"

In a white heat he left the house, chagrined and ashamed. For the moment all his soft thoughts of Veronica were expelled, their place taken only by a bitter sensation of resentfulness and disappointment. As he went, Veronica groped her way to her chair, hysterically crying.

CHAPTER X: DOROTHY

i

LOUIS was so moved and excited after his scene with Veronica that he strode along without thinking where he would go. He was far too full of anger to return home. At first he struck across the common, exclaiming aloud in his torment: then, suddenly, he checked himself in the middle of the open space, turning in the darkness and casting a wild glance about him. Veronica to say that! Veronica to show him in herself the vulgar heart of Beckwith! And Dorothy to suffer! If Beckwith could but know her! Not Beckwith! With the muddled instinct of those birds that attack and destroy a brilliant stranger among them, Beckwithians made their own unforgivable persecution. Beasts!

Then his anger passed, and he gave a little annoyed laugh that held no merriment. There was only one possible destination for him, it was clear. He must go and see Dorothy and William. He walked back straight across the common, and into the High Street. Lights were still showing behind the little shops fringing the green space, but the shops themselves were closed. It was after nine. The High Street was also in darkness, but already a promenade was in progress, up and down the street, and, to the bolder or more amorous, in the direction of the common and the sheltered lanes beyond. And of all the shops Louis saw only that one to which his steps were directed. He saw none of the passers, and

heard none of them, although their steps upon the rough road made a heavy clinking noise, like clogs upon cobbles, and their voices, and the artificially heightened laughter of the girls, echoed from shop-front to shop-front.

When the boy Reggie opened the door beside the shop in answer to Louis's ring, he peered out with a frowning face. His welcome was grudging; but he did not deny that his mother and father were at home. So Louis walked up the stairs and into the back room where he had first seen his cousins. There, in the fire-glow, and under the light of a bright gas, sat Mrs. William, darning socks, with a pair of spectacles precariously resting very far down towards the tip of her nose. At a table behind her mother, with what seemed to be an enormous day-book or ledger open before her, was Dorothy, one hand supporting her white forehead and pushing back her heavy hair. She had evidently guessed the visitor's identity and named Louis to her mother, for Mrs. William was meditatively fingering her spectacles, and looking embarrassed at being caught in a homely occupation. William was not in the room; but as Louis was advancing he heard his cousin's voice behind him.

"That's a real good lad!" William cried, as he came into the room. "Reg. . . . just take your old muck off this chair for your cousin, will you? . . . Look at these, Louis—all these dummy diagram model fallals. Ever see such things in your life? The boy's just brought them down to show us. See, look at this. How does it work, Reg.?"

At first with self-conscious sulkiness, but gradually with uncontrollable enthusiasm, Reggie showed how by applying energy to one part of his erection—which could be done by certain mechanical means for the purchase of which he demanded money—all the other parts could be set in motion and an interesting kinetic problem illus-

trated. Dorothy left her account book; Mrs. William bent forward, with the sock still sheathing her hand, and looked with keen interest over the top of her spectacles. They were all absorbed in the motion of this contrivance, the final utility of which was hidden from all except Reggie, whose invention it was.

"Marvellous where he gets it from," William remarked, turning to Louis. "None of your folk given to this sort of thing? No; nor Mum's here. Give Mum a sock to mend, or a pudding to make—none better. But both these kids are all for using their brains. Here's Reg. absolute mustard on engineering; and Doll, though she's not practical—never had the chance, poor kid—knows as much about the general theory of it as Reg. himself. She keeps my books better than I can keep them myself; she's an L.R.A.M. who can play your head off; and she keeps her own head as no young person I ever met has done. It's all the shop, you know. Mum's folk are all in the grocery, as happy as wasps in marmalade; but these kids—they turned against shops early. Turned up their noses at bacon and tea. No; it's not *making* anything, they say. If you want to be real, you *must* make bridges, or houses, or pictures, or revolutions, or something of the kind. Otherwise, you're a drone. Doll here is best on the elocutionary side. She'll run you off the arguments. Reg. just scowls and shoves his models under your nose."

During this speech Reg. had removed his model and had returned to his own room. Mrs. William sat beaming in her old seat, looking from William to Dorothy and from Dorothy to Louis, her humour, and her pride, and her interest in Louis all aroused. Dorothy alone looked grim, candidly condemning her father's oratory and his interpretations.

"Louis doesn't want to hear all that, Dad," she at last

said. "And it's not true, anyway. It's not Reg. and I who mind about the shop. It's you and Mum. And you don't mind about it for yourselves, but for Reg. and me. And Louis doesn't mind about it, so there's no need to apologise to him. When Louis comes, *forget* all your . . ." She stopped short, for she had clearly been going to say something rude, and unbecoming in a speech to a loved one.

William looked shrewdly at Louis, who did his best to back up and receive the glance appropriately.

"What I said was all true," William replied, in a speech that was a proclamation, although it was addressed to Louis. "Take no notice of what Doll says. She's a woman, and so she's unscrupulous. The shop's been the iron in their souls, Louis. It's the shop that's made them aspire. From the counter to the Bench, as you may say. But we take off our hats to them. Don't we, Mum? We take off our hats to the younger generation."

"Don't be so silly!" said the younger generation; and her pale face was lighted up with a smile so inexpressibly beautiful that Louis caught his breath with sudden wonder.

ii

"Take a seat, Louis!" pursued William. "And if you want to smoke—smoke. Both of them are inoculated. I smoke shag myself. Used to smoke plug; but Mum struck at it. So did my doctor. Very bad for the heart, unless you're leading an open-air life. D'you smoke a pipe, Louis?"

"I used to; but I gave it up when I came home. Gaspers are more in my line now," Louis explained. "My father's got a great dislike of pipes. He thinks they're . . . I don't know what. . . ."

"I should like to smoke a hookah," Dorothy said. "They sound so philosophic. And you read about them in such beautiful books, like 'Eothen.' "

"Ah, but give me a good cigar!" cried William, with enthusiasm. "Nothing to beat it. I once had a box of first-class cigars given to me; and I'll never forget that box as long as I live."

"You gave them all away, Will," said Mrs. William.

"Eh?" He looked disconcerted for a moment. "Well, I gave *some* of them away, I grant; but very far from all of them, my dear. And they were all smoked at home—at Holloway."

"Holloway! Wish we were there now!" Dorothy cried.

"Ee; so do I," chorused Mrs. William, looking over the tops of her spectacles.

William ruffled his hair and glanced for aid at Louis.

"Think of it!" he cried. "I bring them down here for the air; and that's what they tell me! Mind you, Louis; Beckwith don't appear the easiest place in the world to get on with. At Holloway all our customers came in for their things. Used to wait at the counter for their own parcels, and they were like human beings. But here —Mrs. So-and-so comes in and orders threepennorth of biscuits, or a pot of jam, or some little thing that she's forgotten when the boy called in the morning. And it's to be sent home, if you please, in time for this meal or the other, however far away it is. And such airs as they give themselves! There may be one or two waiting; but in walks my-lady, and starts shouting as soon as she's inside the door. Can't stop a minute, so to speak. The common people must stand aside. I feel like saying, 'Take your turn, old dear'; but if I did that, she'd go off and tell all her friends what a rude man Mr. Vechantor's cousin is. So independent . . . don't know

what shopkeepers are coming to. . . . So I just have to kiss my hand to her, so to speak, and pretend to be very grateful. They tell me Peel always ran out and held the door open. . . . It doesn't do to lose a customer, Louis. Not in this sort of business."

"You're doing it," Dorothy said, in her clear voice. William's face became more serious.

"Yes. That's true," he admitted. "One or two. One or two."

"Why is that?" Louis was startled. William hoisted his shoulders in a wry shrug.

"Ah!" he said. "Now you have me. A bit shy of the name, perhaps. Or meant to do it before and didn't like to break with Peel. Can't say. I've had no complaints. The goods are the same; and they're delivered promptly by the same boys as before. It's just the up and down, give and take of trade. There it is, Louis. You can't account for it."

"People like Miss Lampe and Mrs. Callum?" suggested Louis.

"Miss Lampe? Ph!" said Dorothy. "She's never been a real customer here at all. She only buys her odds and ends here. She gets everything she wants from the Stores."

"Never!" cried Louis. "It's not done! I've heard all Beckwithians say over and over again that it's their duty to support the local shops."

"Ah!" said William dryly. "You don't know the ladies, Louis. Some of their ways are very odd, I assure you."

"And Miss Lampe lives so near the station," Dorothy added, laughing, "that nobody can see what she has down by train."

"Really!" exclaimed Louis. His indignation with

Miss Lampe seemed to reach a point hitherto unimaginable.

iii

"The truth is," Dorothy went on frankly, after a little pause, "that Louis doesn't know very much about anything. He's too trusting. He thinks people mean what they say. Well, I learnt long ago that they don't. They wish they did! They spend their lives wishing they did!"

"I'm glad they don't, sometimes," Louis protested, with a significant emphasis. He had the satisfaction of seeing Dorothy smile at his reproof.

"They're always pretending something or other. Pretending to be modest, or good, or kind. But it's only a pretence. They're really only inquisitive," Dorothy went on. "That's the best you can say about them. All the people who've been here—including the clergyman—have come to find out about us. Not to love us, but to see our furniture, and if our hands are dirty, and how many spoons we've got, and if we do our own housework. Anything to make a tattle at the tea-parties."

Louis and William looked at each other. They could not contradict Dorothy: they both may have wished to do so. Louis, feeling so warm after his talk with Veronica, even nodded with unwilling assent. Such a speech made Louis remember what he had learnt from Veronica, and he saw this differently. So far it had appeared to him as an encroachment upon his own liberty. Now it suddenly assumed a larger significance. Beckwith had begun to resent the new-comers so strongly because it had found them unmalleable. It was not that they were his cousins, or that he visited them (though these things counted): it was that Beckwith had found them too business-like. They were in Beckwith for purposes of trade;

and Beckwith's standards are moral. Beckwith was irritated with them. Even if they had not been Vechantors they would have found Beckwith suspicious; but with that added constituent the outlook suddenly appeared to Louis to be darker than ever.

"I've been wondering," he said at last. And then he stopped. They all regarded him with friendly, trustful faces, towards which he looked in an unusual hesitation. Encouraged thus, he went on: "The people here are very 'funny.' You know that. They're very angry—it's no business of theirs, of course; but they think everything is their business—they're angry with you for coming here. They feel it's something unfitting . . . inopportune. And they're not content with feeling that. They're genuinely angry, and worried, and hostile. They'll want to drive you away. Some of them may think that by taking away their custom they'll show their displeasure and make you give up the shop. Perhaps they don't *mean* that; but that's the impulse. And I think they're specially angry with you for having two . . . well, clever . . . children. You see, Reggie wears a badge on his cap; and that offends them dreadfully; and Dorothy looks as though she'd got too much character for Beckwith; and they feel they ought to snub her. They'd feel that, anyhow. But as she takes no notice of them, they think . . . something . . . I can't explain; but I think they feel helpless about it. Presently, of course, they'll settle down; but meanwhile they're in a great flutter, and I expect they're wondering how they can bring their weight to bear on you. If you'd come to live at an ordinary house they couldn't touch you. You wouldn't have any friends among them; but you wouldn't want any. It's only because they *can* attack you through your business that you're vulnerable, I think."

He broke off, reddening at such a long speech. He found Mrs. William gazing at him over her spectacles with an expression of inhuman wisdom; and William, after looking down at the floor for a moment, nodded quietly without replying. Dorothy was smiling, her eyes dark. He glanced appealingly at her and was warmed by her return glance of confidence. He went on again.

"This evening—what really brought me here was an extraordinary conversation with somebody in Beckwith who upbraided me with having anything to do with you. Apparently somebody has been going round . . ." He began to stammer. "Pretending that it's *you* who are luring me into your wicked clutches, so as to establish yourselves here. . . . That you're monsters, you understand. Of course it is horribly perverse, and stupid, and as far as I'm concerned it doesn't in the least matter. Don't think that. But when you say you've lost custom I see . . . or I think I see . . . that perhaps it may be this venomous pettiness that is working in their minds. I think you ought to know. . . ."

"Yes," William meditatively said. "Yes, Louis . . . Yes." His tone was one of acquiescence.

"But we guessed it, didn't we, Dad?" Dorothy supplemented.

"You did, my dear," he agreed.

"I've had a lady talking to me about it to-day," said Mrs. William, in her quiet voice. "She was very anxious—she said—for all our sakes, that 'such an undesirable acquaintance' should be stopped. She said 'Mr. Louis' held such a high position in the district. . . . And that, after all, we were only shop-keepers. She said she didn't want to hurt my feelings . . ."

"Mum!" cried Dorothy, flushing deeply. "Do you mean you listened to her?"

"Yes, dear. I listened. There was nothing else to do. She hadn't paid for her tea," said Mrs. William. "I was waiting to remind her."

iv

There was a curious smile on William's face. He was thinking of his wife. "Mum's very keen after the coppers," he explained to Louis. "I've known her go after somebody right down the street, just for fourpence-ha'penny. Not here, of course."

"What else did she say?" demanded Dorothy, still with that indignant colour in her cheeks.

"She said, my dear, that of course you couldn't be expected to understand such things properly; but that it was giving Mrs. Vechantor—that's Louis's mother—a lot of anxiety. That she spoke for our own good. Oh, a lot of other things she said . . ."

"What other things?" asked Dorothy. "As I come into it."

"Things she'd no business to say, dear," Mrs. William gently explained.

"It's simply scandalous!" cried Louis, as red as Dorothy, and again vehement with rage.

"What things?" persisted Dorothy. "What things, Mum?" Mrs. William shook her head. She was even more determined, it appeared, than her daughter.

"I wouldn't repeat them," she said. "Even if I could. They ought never to have been *thought,* let alone said."

"Oh!" cried Dorothy. She turned upon Louis. "And you've lived here all your life!"

"I've been away a good deal," he urged in extenuation. "And what she said about mother is a fabrication. It's certainly not true. We're not like that. Really, Dorothy!"

"I was *pitying* you!" cried Dorothy. "But, Mum! "Didn't you stop her?"

"No, dear. Nothing would have done that," said Mrs. William.

"She'd got it off by heart, I expect," William added. "There's no stopping them when they're that way inclined. I'd as soon try to stop a train by holding up my hand."

"What *did* you do, then?" Dorothy asked. "Surely you . . . Surely you were rude to her!"

"No, dear," Mrs. William answered. "What was the good of that? I just waited till she'd said all she'd got to say, and then I said, 'Thank you, ma'am. That'll be fivepence three-farthings.' She didn't say anything after that, and I put the money in the till. I haven't thought of it since; but of course I think it's a great pity, and I'm very sorry for poor Mrs. Vechantor . . ."

Louis rose to his feet. He felt as though he were choking with mingled anger and laughter.

"Look here," he said. "I'm going home to talk to my mother about it. It can't go on like this!"

Mrs. William shook her head almost imperceptibly; but Dorothy made a step forward.

"Louis," she said quickly, in a low voice. "I think you're most awfully decent. Really."

"I'm as proud of you," Louis replied, in a similar low voice, "as I'm ashamed of Beckwith. And I wish I knew how I could show it. I *will* show it. You'll see!"

Louis was prophetic in this. He was embarked upon an enterprise that, for all its oddness, or rather perhaps *because* of its curious nature, threatened to be full of grotesque difficulties. But as he spoke Louis did not realise the full meaning of his promise, or the strength of the instinct he was combating.

CHAPTER XI: THE BREAK

i

HE walked home in a state of high excitement. All that turbulent emotion which had been stirred within him by the scene with Veronica, which had been dissolved by his sense of communion with the simple people he had been with, was revived and exacerbated by the tale of the protesting lady. Once more he was quivering with a ridiculous rage. It was ridiculous, because it was unavailing, and because it exhausted his nerves; but it was in another sense not at all ridiculous. It was the sign of his new passionate love of individual values. It was the indignation of youth against the instinct of oppression; and if the immediate occasion was small, out of all proportion to Louis's vehemence, it must be remembered that men are indignant not with incidents but with the forces which they see, or think they see, symbolised in such incidents. Miss Lampe, sitting cosily by her fire, playing patience, whole-heartedly absorbed in the baffling chances of that inept and engrossing game, had as little the air of an oppressor as any friend of tyranny could have desired. But Louis, going behind the artless gamester, saw Miss Lampe as a dreadful and wicked irresponsible. Who shall judge between Louis and Miss Lampe? Miss Lampe a true Christian, collecting for charities, desiring that all should be driven for their own good forcibly into the path of virtue and social convenience, and kept there; Miss Lampe, full of

conscious rectitude, scrupulously economical in her own affairs, curious, interested in the life about her and desirous of regulating it for its own good in accordance with the strict teaching of the Church and the Beckwith standards. Louis, half Miss Lampe's age, full of half-baked knowledges and theories of life, arrogant, sceptical, practically an unbeliever in all the doctrines by which Miss Lampe regulated her life and for their own good sought to regulate the lives of others, aspiring to heights of feeling and vision that Miss Lampe was unconscious of shunning. Miss Lampe social and sociable; Louis passionately individualistic and perverse. Miss Lampe resting comfortably in the middle of her appropriate milieu; Louis, newly awakened, struggling to antagonise himself with the community. And, when they met, Louis coldly contemptuous, Miss Lampe birdlike and suspicious, but flattered and talkative. If only one could know which way is best to follow—the way of Miss Lampe, or the way of Louis—how much simpler life would be!

ii

It was still comparatively early—it was not yet half-past ten—when he reached Apple House. The servants of course were all in bed, because they had to rise early; but the Vechantors rarely went to bed before eleven or half-past. Accordingly, Louis entered the drawing-room with the expectation of seeing both his mother and father. Only his father was there, smoking a cigar and reading an old book. It was perhaps that fact—the fact that the two met alone—that precipitated the crisis. They merely nodded to each other, and Louis, sniffing at his father's beautiful cigar, was reminded of William's reminiscence. An impulse came to him to send William a box of such cigars as his father smoked.

Why should he not do so? He made a mark in his notebook so that he might be reminded on the morrow. The thought of giving a pleasant surprise lightened his heart. All the same, he was far from being at his ease. His other emotions had prepared him to feel aware of his father's suppressed disapproval of his whole outlook. They were no longer friends. That link was broken. His father was just a man—not the oracle of former days. Estrangement could go no further, because it was common to both of them. Louis was restless, divided between staying and going to bed. But as he hesitated his father put aside the book and forked that sudden glance from Louis's face to his feet. He saw a slim young man with carefully brushed black hair and moustache, a young man with a troubled face, whose pallor lent brightness to his eyes; but he did not see the son of his heart, upon whom his ambitions had been fixed for six-and-twenty years.

"Louis," he said, "I want to speak to you. Sit down. Toppett has been here this evening. He tells me an extraordinary story. The man's a clumsy, practical bullock; but he's not a fool."

Directly his father began to speak Louis realised what was coming. The knowledge braced him as cold water would have done. His anger, his restlessness, both disappeared. He became once again Louis Vechantor, the young man who at Oxford had learnt to control himself and to regard evils ironically. For the first time that evening he was talking to one who was his equal in education. He had nothing to fear, because he knew he would be able to speak without translating his thoughts into another idiom.

"I've sometimes thought he sailed pretty near it," he ventured nonchalantly. Again that forking glance from under his father's bushy eyebrows.

"At any rate," the older man explained; "he doesn't lose his head. He's not hysterical. I think that's a good deal to be able to say of a man in his position. In these days. Well, now, he came about a variety of matters . . . the Church Rooms, and so on. But after a time he began to talk about you. I see you know what he said. He told us—I had no idea before—that you've been frequently seeing these people. It's all over Beckwith. He saw you going there this evening. Now, as he says, it's one thing for him to go there, because such visits lie within the range of his parochial duties; but it's quite another thing for you, considering your relation to me, and my relation to the district, to go. . . . He's been. He's seen the family. He's talked to them, and he's also talked to others who have been as a matter of parochial business."

"That means Miss Lampe," Louis could not help saying.

"That woman? Oh. I didn't realise it was she."

"I gather several people have been interfering a good deal," Louis added. "But Miss Lampe has certainly been very busy. I met Dorothy—that's William's daughter—in the train one evening; and Miss Lampe has been telling everybody that we go for long walks together. I once met them out. And I've been twice to see them. That's the sum of my relation with them. They're very good sorts, and I like them."

"Yes . . . yes," said his father. "You like them?"

"Very much. William and his wife are awfully decent; the boy's clever, and going to be an engineer; Dorothy's something quite unusual."

"H'm. Toppett takes a different view. He says they're quite impossible."

"Then he's wrong." Louis kept his temper; but his decision was summary.

"Well, then," said Mr. Vechantor. "I take it that you intend to keep up the acquaintance?"

"I should be proud to," admitted Louis. "I should say they're a good deal above the level of intelligence in Beckwith." He met his father's eyes squarely, almost with an air of defiance.

"Nonsense," said Mr. Vechantor. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"After all," Louis remarked coldly, "I've seen them."

His father looked quickly away. There was a moment's silence. Mr. Vechantor resumed:

"Louis, you understand that we represent the society of Beckwith. I suppose I'm the most important resident in the town. My name carries most weight, perhaps. I'm accustomed to a good deal of deference. One has to think of one's position in a place like this. It has to be conserved, unless one is to be eccentric, and regarded as such. I don't see my way to entering into relations with these people. I've come to the conclusion that we must regard them as having no claim upon us. I don't wish you to see them. I wish you to explain to them—or, perhaps, not to explain, as that ought never to have been necessary—that you can't continue to see them." His command was gently expressed; but he spoke as one who had but to request.

Louis paled. He moved, so that he was looking directly away from his father.

"You don't mention an alternative," he said, rather breathlessly.

"There is no alternative," said Mr. Vechantor.

"Oh," Louis answered. "You don't understand. I'm not able to take that view. It's quite impossible for me to give up seeing them. Unless, of course, they . . . despise us all too much."

Mr. Vechantor drew a deep breath. His brows were drawn ironically.

"I recognise that such a position has its picturesqueness," he said quietly. "But I'm sorry to say that I must insist on your doing as I said."

Louis suddenly laughed. It was not a bitter laugh, but it was a nervous laugh.

"How antediluvian!" he exclaimed; and walking quickly across the room he left his father alone, thinking, perhaps, of the prestige of the Vechantors of Beckwith.

iii

The door of his mother's room was open. She was sitting by the fire, and would be going to bed as soon as he had bidden her good-night. At his step upon the threshold she looked over her shoulder, smiling and nodding.

"Are you going to bed now?" she asked. "I'm going now."

"Are you? Yes; I shall go. . . . I say, mother; you know what father's been talking to me about. That doesn't represent your view, does it?" He was different again from what he had been with his father. His mother's presence always soothed him; his manner to her was always more gentle, even, it might have appeared, to some observers, more docile. Mrs. Vechantor looked up into his face before answering.

"Well, dear . . . I'm told they're not very nice people," she said quietly.

"But you don't believe that?" he urged. "Surely, mother!"

"I'm afraid I . . . You see, Louis, I've been told certain things about them . . ."

"Why don't you go and see them for yourself? You'd find that all these busybodies have . . . have taken with them what they wanted to see." His mother still anxiously regarded him. "You'd believe me, wouldn't you?" Louis went on. "Rather than Miss Lampe, who's a mischief-maker. And I can assure you that I know them better than all the Lampes and Callums and Toppetts in Beckwith."

"My dear old boy, you're not very old, you see. . . . And a pretty face . . ."

"Mother!" cried Louis. "What do you mean?"

"Mr. Toppett has no reason at all to misrepresent them. He's an extremely honest man."

"But he's been primed by the Lampes of Beckwith. . . ." Louis was aghast at her attitude. He might have cried "Et tu Brute!" It was the beginning of his slow, bitter disappointment.

"I'm sorry, dear," his mother said.

"You refuse to go and see them? Let me . . . let me at least bring Dorothy to see you," he urged.

"I've seen her in church, Louis. I've seen all of them in church."

"I always thought that was a passport!" he cried.

"Oh, Louis, you frighten me!" said Mrs. Vechantor. "I've been very anxious about you. Really anxious. You concealed the fact that you knew them at all. And to hear that you're with them so often! Do . . . please, Louis . . . Do think a little of your mother!"

There had come into Louis's eyes an expression of hopelessness. Well, he had no longer that illusion, he thought. His mother was not "different" after all. She was the same. It was no good! One by one his confidences had given. With a wooden face he stooped and kissed her. His mother caught at his hand, and pressed it, striving in this way to force the exchange of a lov-

ing look which should cancel all their differences; but his heart was chilled.

"Good night, mother," Louis said. "I'm very sorry indeed."

He went slowly into his room, thinking deeply, standing long before the fireplace.

iv

This, then, was over. He had been instructed to drop his cousins. Just as though he were a little boy still, incapable of forming any judgment for himself. He was no longer angry, but he was heart-sick. He loathed Beckwith as he had never before loathed it. There was no more impatience with it; there was a deep distaste. The place was rank. It had no human standards; only the stupid little spying, jealous taboos of a primitive community. Totemism was rational compared with such a beastly little faith. One must not disbelieve in the faith of worldly goods and worldly position, because if one disbelieved one produced a subtle discomfort. And the William Vechantors were a foreign body. They were to be expelled by the wonderful natural forces governing Beckwith. There had been no attempt to grapple with them. Only to get rid of them. First to ignore them, and then to get rid of them. Make them uncomfortable; make them go somewhere else! It was not that they were better or worse than the Beckwithians; it was enough that they were different. Crucify them! And himself? If he went on "knowing" his cousins—what was in store? Gossip. Malignant gossip. Cold shouldering, cuts, disdain. . . . Until he repented. Then, upon his repentance, a general revival of heartiness and good cheer. The prettiest of their

daughters . . . a comfortable home, the social whirl of Beckwith, position, ease, slow decay . . .

But meanwhile he was to be punished by disapproval; he was to be kneaded into conformity by the general pressure of the herd. The William Vechantors were to be expelled and he was to be talked or neglected into submission. That was the way these things were done in Beckwith. If he had been indifferent, if his heart had not been torn, he could have ignored this pressure, because he had no wish to be swallowed up by Beckwith. But it meant his being cut off from Veronica; and the funny persecution of the William Vechantors would go on. He was in a difficulty. Beckwith was stupid and contemptible; but in the circumstances it was not negligible. It had the power to say to the new grocer: We do not like your name, and so we will not deal of you. Either sell your business at once, or stay here on peril of our displeasure. To Louis it had the power to say: You belong to us, your family holds a prominent position in the town as the result of our opinion (upon whatever that opinion may be based), and if you remain one of us we will recognise your right to live and we will engulf you. But if you attempt to play King Canute, and defy the inexorable oncoming of our common strength, then shall we cast you derelict upon the beach in the wreckage of your cousin's shop. And the horrible part to Louis was that Beckwith did not consciously say this. It felt its way, blind-mouthed, and its leaders were wretched little people drawn on by an itch for knowing irrelevant things and managing the affairs of others. They were not leaders; they were spies.

At last, at one o'clock in the morning, Louis went to bed; but it was not to sleep. It was to lie awake grinding ever deeper into his heart the painful beliefs that

he had reached in these thoughts. He slowly made up his mind as to his future action. His father forbade him to see his cousins: well, he refused that command. His pride and his self-respect were both involved. He would not forsake them, unless his friendship should be found to be injuring the business directly. In that case he would act otherwise. But if he refused to obey his father their relations would be intolerable. Very well: he would leave home. He could very easily take rooms in town and continue to work at the office. He could visit his mother, and could visit his cousins. He could no longer bear to live in Beckwith. He had come to feel horror of it—a sheer nervous repulsion. So he would leave it. Was that a running away? No; because he would be seen in Beckwith (at least every time he passed Miss Lampe's house), visiting his cousins. He would show Beckwithians that he could be staunch to his true friends. But he could no longer stand their eternal presence. And above all—this was a thing that Louis only half admitted to himself—his pride could not submit to exclusion from the Hughes's house. He might be angry with Veronica, or he might pity her; but his heart beat faster every time he thought that Mrs. Hughes might close the door of her house to him.

Louis was so far from estimating the facts truly that he imagined such a thing possible. It was, of course, absurd; but he was deeply moved and incapable of seeing things coolly. He was so moved that he could not sleep at all, but turned from side to side, waiting only for the daylight, so that he could leave Apple House and no longer regard it as his home.

CHAPTER XII: VERONICA'S BID

i

THE decision taken, it was perfectly easy for Louis to establish himself in London, upon a third floor near Finsbury Square. He was near the office and within reach of the West End. Once the break with Apple House had been made, the sense of new independence came to his aid in dispelling the sense of depression which had been caused by such a change. He worked hard all day at the office, and in the evenings he read or went to the theatre. Nothing could have suited him better at this time. His rooms were large and barely furnished, and as he took most of his meals out he did not quickly discover the shortcomings of the service. For a few days he was too much occupied with his arrangements to feel lonely; and with plenty of coals and plenty of tobacco and books he could defy the winter. He was happy.

And then began the work of his memory. Old days rose again before him, joyous days of peace in the garden, of cricket and football at school, of punting on the Cherwell, and tremendous evenings of talking in his Oxford rooms. He remembered all the most beloved spots near Beckwith, all the happy discoveries of the district; the tiled roofs of the oldest houses, the cobbles before the Lion, the glimpses from his bedroom window at home. They assumed a new aching loveliness that filled him at times with melancholy. For those things

he had nothing but love. They were the permanent things: the human beings passed, but the beauties of place were indestructible.

Louis, however, was a human being; and he could not deny that his more exciting memories were human too. The gentle thoughts of old happenings were sweet; but places without inhabitants would be desolate indeed. Perhaps he could not have borne to recall the lines of the Surrey Hills if at every turn he had not also remembered human associations, the sight of men, the sound of their voices. And if he longed for Beckwith it was not simply for its own beauty or for that of its surroundings. It was for Veronica's sake; since Veronica was more constantly in his thoughts than ever. He could not forget her. His anger was gone; his pity had followed it; there now remained only the residuum of all the feelings she had inspired—and that residuum took such tantalising form that his incessant craving was for the sight of her. It ran like ichor in his veins, making his pulses leap. In solitude he was very much more in love with her than he had been at Beckwith. She was transfigured in his musings, so that she became almost an ideal creation of gentleness and love.

ii

With such preoccupations he discovered that as he read the words faded from his mind and gave place to memories; that the voices of actors were like the barking of dogs. At the office, when he was not actively engaged in the business of the day, Veronica was before him. He longed to possess a photograph of her, so that he might revivify his impressions of her beauty. Somewhere behind him she stood, not in that puzzling sad-

ness which had driven him from the house, but with laughter and composure. Most of his doubts were strained away. All that remained was pleasurable. Almost, he regretted leaving Beckwith. What was the impulse that had so abruptly pitchforked him out of the town, away from his happiness? It was already inexplicable to him.

Finally Louis made an effort to see Daunton. He was introduced to the girl who had caused all the commotion in the Daunton family. She was quiet and assured, and her quietness and assurance pleased him, though other things about her did not. For one thing she dressed without taste; he felt she was practical rather than dainty, as a wife should be. She had no allure. When she looked at Daunton she screwed her eyes up, and her smile was not pretty. It was hungry. But Louis felt that in her capability she had the makings of a staunch companion. She would exploit Daunton for his own good. He was less her lover than her protégé. When he had left them, Louis felt that he had overrated the romance of this affair, and yet he did not regret it at all. Daunton's weakness was too apparent; he would be the instrument of any woman who should marry him. So why not the instrument of Ethel? Since that was his paramount wish at the moment.

A week later, Louis assisted at their cheerless marriage at a register office, gave them a lunch, and saw them off from Victoria for a honeymoon that was to last no longer than the week-end. This ceremony was the culmination of his distress, for Daunton was helplessly nervous and Ethel bright-eyed, silent, strangely sharp in feature. They did not appear to be happy, or eager; but only as if they were being driven into each other's arms by some common misfortune or some wretched craving that neither could withstand. Louis was depressed when he

left them; and when he afterwards spent a lonely evening in his rooms he was all the more depressed. The state in which he found himself was almost insupportable. Chilled at such unpromising nuptials, lonely, discouraged, he found his sole happiness—which, instead of being restorative, only excited him and rendered him still more dissatisfied—in gnawing thoughts of Veronica. He became morose and emotional, restlessly moving about the room, sitting down again, springing up, talking aloud. Finally: "I can't stand this!" he exclaimed. "I really can't stand it. It's driving me mad. Either I must see her, or write to her. I *must* do something. But what shall I do?"

iii

And then, on the following morning—a Saturday—he found a private letter upon his desk at the office. It was from Veronica. Even before he opened it he knew that the letter could be from nobody else. His fingers were slightly trembling as he slit the envelope. Within was a small sheet of paper, covered with writing in a small ill-formed hand, and, at the head, that embossed address in brown lettering after the similitude of bare twigs which the Hughes family always, in defiance of taste, used upon their note-paper.

"Louis,"—the letter abruptly began,—"You might at least have said you were going. I was not well that evening, and you were beastly. I feel I never want to see you again. I don't know what I am doing, writing to you; but I can't go on like this. One day you will know how silly you have been. But then it will be too late. You are so touchy, nobody can say a word to

you. You don't care how unhappy you make anybody. Oh, why am I writing like this? I am awfully unhappy. You might at least write and say you are sorry. Don't write here. Mother is too curious about letters. I am coming up to London on Tuesday, to stay with some friends at Stroud Green. I shall be at London Bridge station at three o'clock. If I don't see you then I shall know you don't want to see me any more, and that you've thrown over all your old friends because of this wretched thing that's happened. I wish they had never come to Beckwith. Then we might have gone on as we were, happily. Good-bye.

"VERA."

Louis read this letter with breathless attention, smiling and half-despising, but also constrained and exhilarated. It fed his vanity; it made him feel ashamed and exultant. But at least it never entered his head to fail at the rendezvous. He began to plan the meeting, and where they would go. Of course he must see her, and explain something. Where could they go for tea, so that they could talk? His mind was quickly made up. He would meet her . . . his imagination was active, picturing their meeting. . . . They would go to the Seistrata Café, where, at that time in the afternoon, there would be nobody but themselves in its warm depths. One thing, the letter was a clarification. It carried them very much farther. Veronica showed that she was not indifferent to him. If he could convince her of the rightness of his action in leaving Beckwith! Could he do that? He did not like the idea of clandestine interviews; it distressed him that Veronica should make such an appointment. Yet it did not distress him very much, for his blood was hot and he too eagerly welcomed the meeting for any stir of puritanism greatly

to affect him. The one discomfort was the thought that Veronica should have suggested it. Even there he found an excuse. If she were driven to appoint a secret meeting, it was Beckwith that should be blamed. If Beckwith found fault, then so much the better. Beckwith was cursed with the itch for fault-finding.

How long the day seemed! How long the week-end! And, on Tuesday, would the hours never run their slow course! He was on fire; he was half-demented with the good fortune that had come to save him from the agony of gradually encroaching despair. Veronica! Veronica! Over and over again he read her precious letter.

iv

Louis was on the platform at London Bridge station long before the train was due. He walked up and down that bleak strip of stone and cement, and was penetrated by a rushing wind that foreboded snow. The time hung as though it would never pass. The station clock and his own watch were affected with the same disease: they hardly moved their dilatory hands. Other trains came round the bends and rattled their way out of the station. Porters telescoped undistinguishable names in a ridiculous chant. But Veronica's train dallied. It was several minutes after three when at last a heavy signal dropped, and at that moment Louis's impatience became fever. He could no longer continue his promenade. Instead, he took up his position near the stairs down to the street, and stood trembling there. And then—at last!

Veronica jumped from a carriage. He moved forward, his eyes on her face. She seemed paler than usual; her manner, perfectly self-possessed, was cold Neither spoke in the first minute, and Louis took he

bag with a coldness as great as her own. They were not constrained: they were frozen. Only when they were upon the stairs did their arms touch, and Louis gently took her elbow.

"You've had a rotten journey, I expect," he said; and Veronica, shivering a very little, pressed his hand to her side.

V

When they were out of the station Louis touched her no longer.

"I thought we'd go and have tea at the Seistrata," he explained, leading her across London Bridge. "It's quite near the other side of the bridge."

She made no answer; but walked on by his side. They came out upon the bridge, and saw the heavy waters of the river go swirling beneath them, noiseless in the rumble of the traffic. Beneath their feet the pavement was thick with greasy mud. Above the city hung a leaden sky, blackened with smoke. All about them omnibuses and cabs and drays made a common din, above which voices could not be heard. It was like being in the midst of thunder; but no piercing arrows of lightning broke the grimness. They were crushed by the noise and the gloom, two moving atoms in the reverberate city.

Louis could not tell whether Veronica was timid or thoughtful; if she dreaded their talk or awaited it. He was lost in the sense of her nearness. Once, when he looked down, she was looking up, and their interchange ended in a smile before Veronica's head was turned aside. A hope rose in his breast. He saw no coquetry, no instinct of sullenness to bring about his abasement and a protestation of his love. No resolve was evident to him in her pallor. The words of Veronica's letter came into Louis's mind, and he thought of them as the words

of a girl, unformed, unused to expressing herself. Even their stubborn, childish crudity increased his sense of their value to him. He was sorry for Veronica, but full also of something far more intricate than compassion, because his emotions were engaged. His eyes were glowing, and his heart too. If they had been truly remote, as they only seemed to be, he would have been as humble and as tractable as any lover before his mistress's frown. He would have been all to her. But they were not alone; and Louis was too simple and too honest to think of intrigue. If she had not quite all his heart (and that was because his own heart was as mysterious to him as the heart of another), at least Veronica had all his thoughts. Then pride came to Louis. He was very proud to be with her, thus by her side. She was so slim, so lovely, in spite of the trouble that had pinched and whitened her face. What was he going to say to her?

They were at the Seistrata, and in a corner of its silent depths. Upon the walls were heavy tapestries; upon the floor thick soundless carpets; between table and table jutting screens or tall plants that half-concealed one party from another. Everything was quiet, discreet. Interposed, as it were, to keep them from the rest of the world was the impalpable wall of each silence. The waitress received their order and went away; and Veronica drew off her gloves and opened the neck of her short fur coat. Louis watched those slim fingers, marvelling at them. He was extraordinarily conscious of what it would feel like to touch them. Still Veronica did not speak and would not meet his eyes. She seemed unconscious of his gaze, though there was now a faint colour in her cheeks, and a subtle air of relief in her whole demeanour.

"Are you going to be long away?" Louis desperately asked.

At last she spoke.

"I didn't think you'd come," she said. And he did not believe her. Did she think he would do so?

vi

"I think you must have felt I should," Louis answered seriously. "I should have written to say I'd come if you hadn't told me not to write. I ought to have written before; but I hadn't . . . hadn't thought of it. I hadn't got so far."

"No," Veronica said. Louis was vaguely disappointed at the reply. It enabled him to read nothing behind; and he was in dire need of knowing what she wished their relation to be. Well, at least he had told her the truth. He hadn't used the obvious lie that business had prevented him from writing. She resumed in a dry, wounded tone: "I think you might have let me know where you were."

"I thought you were too sick with me," he protested.

Their colloquy was interrupted by the waitress, who brought their tea. Veronica moved forward in her chair, her hands hovering.

"You might have been dead . . . anything," she went on. That was so false that he made no reply; but only looked at her rather wonderingly. "You didn't think that we might be worried."

"No. I admit I didn't," Louis agreed. "Were you?"

Veronica drew a quick breath.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, in a sort of artificially measured voice, deeper than usual. "I thought perhaps you'd come round to apologise, you know . . ."

"What for?" asked Louis. There was a lightning exchange of glances. As he took his tea-cup from her hand the tea flittered over into the saucer. Veronica's hand was trembling. "What did you want me to apolo-

gise for?" he asked again, quite astonished at the hard defiance that had crept into his voice. "I didn't mean to hurt you; but I don't think I said anything to apologise for, did I?"

"Well, then, perhaps to give me a chance of apologising," Veronica said, in the same curious voice.

"Of saying you'd been wrong?"

"Oh no!" She was answering hardness with hardness.

"Well, I was very angry with you," Louis said. "I didn't want to resume our argument, and yet, you see, I couldn't promise to give my cousins up. In fact, I've left Beckwith on that account."

"I see. Run away," commented Veronica.

"Not altogether that. . . . Don't you think you could agree with me, Veronica?" Louis had suddenly, trappingly, abandoned his hardness. He was appealing to her.

"If you were right there'd be no need for me to agree," Veronica prevaricated.

"Won't you let me explain how right I am?"

She cast a quick look round, to see that they were not observed. Then, in an irritated tone, she refused his appeal.

"It's no good beginning all over again," she said sharply. "Besides, there's nothing to argue about."

"I want you to agree with me . . . Vera! I respect your judgment."

Still she shook her head, stubborn to repel something she could not imagine.

"Yes," she retorted. "You respect it when I agree with you."

"Oh!" cried Louis, thinking. Then, suddenly, he added: "I wonder if you've ever really agreed with me about anything on earth?"

Nothing could have hurt Veronica more than that doubt. Louis saw her flinch. She put down her cup, looking away from him, as if she tried to retain composure. The corners of her mouth pathetically drooped. When she spoke her voice was unsteady. Tears were in her eyes.

"Of course I have," she said quickly. "Don't be so horrible! It's you who've changed."

"Well, then, won't you change, too?"

"Oh no!" It sounded final. "No!"

"I've set my heart on it. I want you to be big enough to stand by yourself."

Veronica's cheeks slowly reddened. She appeared not to be able to keep still.

"It isn't that," she said, in a melancholy way. "You only want me to agree with you. That's all you want. You don't care how much I suffer, so long as I agree with you."

They both sighed; and Louis's heart felt leaden within him.

"I don't really know what I want," he admitted, with a great effort after honesty. He only knew that he wanted her to be kind. Without realising what he was saying, he added eagerly: "But I'm so tired of feeling that I'm hurting you and not doing *them* any good. I'm just dissatisfied with myself—with everything." In that moment, at the slightest sign of self-forgetful love from Veronica, he might have abandoned everything for her. He did not know how far that unpremeditated crystallisation of his secret chagrin had carried him beyond ordinary self-control. It was a crucial instant, but the instant passed, unheeded by either. As she did not reply,

but, obeying another instinct, continued to look away, determined to conquer that in him which was unconquerable, Louis went on in another tone. "How is Adela? I hope she's well. And how's Judith? Judith still studying diagrams?"

With a quick jerk Veronica looked sharply back into Louis's face. Her face altered. It became exasperated, and no longer as though she were intently listening. It was because of the change in his tone, which had been due to a striving after lightness and, for Louis, a necessary relief. It almost seemed to him that she had in some way been viciously enjoying their wrangle—at least, that she would have preferred to continue wrangling rather than accept the opportunity of improving a topic less personal. For a moment Veronica did not speak. Clearly, she was forcing herself to something. Then:

"Oh, they're all right," she listlessly answered. "Nothing ever changes in Beckwith." Rather indignantly, catching her breath, she went on: "Judy doesn't study diagrams. I don't know what you mean! She just reads a lot. There's no harm in that, I suppose?" At his smile, which was at her sudden warmth, and held no baser significance, she lowered her lids. Agitatedly, she began: "I don't know *what* you're thinking about us. I'm sure it's not nice—as though we weren't nice girls. . . . You seem to think we're funny—as if you looked down on us in a lordly way. . . ." As she concluded, her voice was trembling again with feeling.

"I?" asked Louis, astounded. "Why, Vera! This is worse than ever!"

"You used to like us."

"I do still."

"No. You don't. I can see you don't. You despise us. She's made you think differently."

"She?" He felt absolutely at the end of his knowl-

edge of her. This savage, half-crying, defiant Veronica was somebody wholly foreign to his conception of her nature. "She? Who's 'she'?"

"That girl!"

"Why . . . Dorothy? How extraordinary this is! D'you see how . . . She? You *do* mean Dorothy? Why, Vera; she's a young girl—younger than you are. How could she change me? It's absurd!"

"She has! You're quite changed. Quite." Veronica spoke almost sullenly. Then, in a fierce, strangled voice, she cried: "D'you think I can't tell!"

viii

Both were trembling vehemently. Louis was too astounded to be master of himself; Veronica too madly angry with him to be more than half-aware of her own folly. And yet the sense of that folly had begun to work in her and to heighten her unhappiness. They could not speak to each other; but, trembling, looked with bent heads at the table-cloth, at the tea-things, at their own clothing. Veronica seemed presently as though she were listening. A knell might have rung in her ears when Louis, violently constraining himself, resumed in a dead voice:

"What time have you to be at your friends' house? You go from Moorgate Street, I suppose?"

"Broad Street," Veronica said hurriedly. "I'd better go now."

There seemed nothing for either to say. Both were filled with a numbing pain that kept them, from sheer hopelessness of relief, from going back to their conversation. Veronica began to fasten her jacket, and Louis to look at his watch. Long afterwards, when they were half-way to Broad Street in a taxi-cab, Veronica began

to wipe her eyes; but Louis was looking out of the window and did not see her. Only when she was in the train, standing at the window as the engine sent its first two or three slow puffs of smoke thundering into the air, Veronica said in a stifled voice:

"I needn't have gone yet, really. Louis!"

She made a motion to open the carriage door. It was too late. And Louis, who had been turning away, hardly knew that she had spoken. So while Veronica cried in the railway carriage Louis walked back to his rooms, coldly stupefied with a sense of failure and bitter disappointment.

CHAPTER XIII: NADIR

i

AFTERWARDS, Louis found himself more restless than he had ever been. The meeting had been a failure; but it had not solved his difficulties. Instead, it had aggravated them. When he thought of the part he had himself played he was aghast. Was this, then, firmness that he had shown? If Veronica had been unrecognisable, so, surely, had he! Unrelenting, unyielding, he had forced her to an admission of jealousy; but, so far from exulting in that, he had repelled her, because she had shown no sign of appreciating his position. Apparently, he thought, he loved his own view of life better than he loved Veronica! He had not realised that before. Did he love her at all?

The problem tormented him to the point of desperate self-ridicule. She had been right: he only wanted her to agree with him. And if Veronica was stubborn, so, Louis now understood, was he. The sense of it made him sigh. Was it simply obstinacy that held them both back from a candid explanation? How difficult things were! Why couldn't they agree? Why could not Veronica see that he was right? Alternatively, why could he not sink his loyalty to William and be happy in a common set of standards with Veronica? Was the cause truly, as Veronica had proclaimed, that he cared more for Dorothy, after all, than for Veronica? He was puzzled and impatient and unhappy.

But he had been firm! Oh, he had been firm! He had been like a man, and he had not known that he could be firm against Veronica. She could not move him! She must fear him! The thought was palatable. Sooner or later, she would give in. She was bound to give in, for her opposition was founded on jealousy. His firmness, on the other hand, based itself upon conviction.

Even in the midst of this satisfactory reflection, Louis felt his heart sinking. What if he lost Veronica?

ii

Yes, what if he lost Veronica? If Louis could have seen himself he would have been surprised to notice how pale and rigid were his lips, how deeply glowing his eyes. When he shrugged away that question it was because he could not make up his mind. Some secret tide of indifference had set in, chilling him. Like an unhappy child he was fighting to preserve an opinion of Veronica that his perceptions were every minute corroding. The old doubts of her were lurking ever-ready to destroy the fair vision. It was not that his sense of power over her had injured his loyalty, as it might have done if Louis had been a male coquette. He was not withdrawing triumphantly from a now pursuing victim. He was angry and distressed, surprised, repetant, but resolved. Veronica, instead of leaving all wilfully to love and time, was demanding his submission as the price of her love. It was intolerable. It would have been intolerable if he had been very much more in love than he was; but the position was less favourable to her even than that. In the very moment when she should have been mysterious in his eyes Veronica had lost dignity. She had been driven by that jealousy which is the base metal of love into an attempted tyranny. The love upon which

she had relied was not strong enough. Louis that night slept not at all: he was still anxious, dispirited; but his heart was not softened. In the morning, almost without plan, he drew from his pocket the much-read note of assignation, and tore it ruthlessly into shreds. He sighed as he did so; but when the last shreds were trembling in the fire, black, with little running sparks of dying red still playing in the dead paper, Louis shuddered slightly. It was a shudder in which hopelessness was mingled with relief. All was not yet over; the next days, the next weeks, might revive the emotion he had felt; but for the present Veronica had lost. Aversion, ever so slight, follows any woman's attempt to force the pace in love; and Louis, morose and disappointed, did not yet realise that an adverse current had set in. It was a current which was carrying him, perhaps, a little deeper into the understanding of his own life; but it was also rendering unnavigable one of the few channels still open to him for any means of reconciliation with Beckwith.

iii

And then a very curious thing happened. Mr. Vechantor began to come every day to the office. He had thrown aside his sloth, and had resumed work. He now dealt personally with all those things which recently had been in Louis's hands. In a week Louis, who saw his father only in the most casual way, had become a cipher in the firm. No longer were papers upon his desk each morning for attention. They were all taken to Mr. Vechantor's room. The clerks raised eyebrows: when Mr. Vechantor made mistakes, which he did through lack of acquaintance with current business, the clerks came to Louis for their rectification. His father neither

came to him nor sent for him. From a position of power, Louis fell in a single week to a position of nothingness. Long hours of idle busy-ness upon unimportant details kept him at his desk; but he did nothing that a minor clerk might not have done. Thoughts of expostulation occurred to him; he planned speeches and letters to his father; but the impossibility of making any impression upon that stubborn mind was so evident that he abandoned all these notions and fell back upon reserve.

At this time Louis's position was truly pitiable. He was paralysed by his disappointed love for Veronica, and his father's action, which otherwise he might have countered by a protest as arbitrary, robbed him of that occupation which might have distracted his mind. Beneath the quiet endurance which he imposed upon himself, Louis suffered the anguish of a sensitive nature. At times he was in such mental agony that he became really ill—listless, overstrained, passionately nervous. That made him incapable of action; and the sense of his impotence increased his self-hatred. He saw himself as useless—the worst conception of a sick mind. Not only was he useless, but he was even the cause of sorrow to others. Stupid, helpless, useless . . . that was the burden of Louis's thoughts.

Slowly he began to hate his father, to distort his character and his past acts. But in the midst of this distortion came a return gust of self-contempt, and Louis resumed his helpless baffled feeling of passive hatred. He no longer sought to justify it by distortions. He ran the lengths of all nervous reactions to his disappointment. He could hardly have been more miserable, because he was inactive—inert; and the feeling of defeat was heavy upon him. Never, in all the moods of discouragement which are the penalties paid by every nature capable of feeling acutely, had Louis reached such depths of de-

spondency as he now touched. He had gone right down into the trough. Only some startling event could save him from a long period of despair. He seemed altogether without objective. The first thrill of his loyalty to Daunton and to his cousins had subsided. It was an additional cause for depression, for he was unhappy about Daunton's uncoloured marriage, and his support of the William Vechantors, so far from helping them, had only increased their difficulties and the hostility with which they had been assailed.

iv

It was at this point that he received a visit one evening from Daunton. He was sitting by the fire in his room, trying to read grave words that made no impression at all upon his mind, when the door was suddenly opened and Daunton made his appearance. Not a jaunty or even a contented Daunton; but a haggard figure in whose every movement one could read discontent and a sort of misery hard for another man to bear. Even in the first glimpse Louis was moved to a feeling of contempt. Daunton was not the excited young lover, or the determined rebel: he was distraught indeed, but in a weak and undecided way that made sympathy from the outset almost impossible. In Louis's own mood sympathy, so much needed by both, was difficult to evoke. He was himself too miserable to make any effort at identification with the misery of another an easy thing. He started up, drawing forward a second chair; and then he offered his tobacco pouch and a box of cigarettes with a gesture as near as to that of bored acceptance as his instinctive hospitality could allow. He did not want Daunton before him in any light but that of a successful rebel. Failure here was only another source of exasperation. It told

him that he had meddled with Daunton's life also for evil. There was no rest at all. Everything had gone wrong. Oh, if he could but let things slide, as happy people did!

Louis could not let things slide. His mind was too alert to fall into the lethargic inattention that apes contemplativeness. That was why he was now so unhappy. He could not let Veronica go without a thought. He was not coldly selfish, as is the successful amorist or the successful man of business. When he looked at Daunton it was with a sense of responsibility for evil that nothing could have conquered. And that made him ashamed and irritable and contemptuous. He saw in a flash that Daunton, so far from being courageous, as he had believed, had slipped into a relation with Ethel, and a confession to himself, and an act of apparent independence, through sheer lack of will to battle with his first impulse. Louis despised such weakness. He despised it all the more because he knew himself to be weak. However he might love freedom he knew he was not himself free. Like Daunton, he was governed entirely by his impulses; and the strongest, without reference to judgment, was the impulse that triumphed. So he glowered at Daunton, who sat with every muscle relaxed, in the armchair corresponding to his own. The sight made Louis instinctively stiffen.

Daunton filled his pipe, slowly puffing and stopping the rising tobacco that curled out from the pipe's bowl. In silence the two sat for several minutes looking at the fire. That silence also was irksome to Louis. Everything, in his present mood, would have been irksome to him. When they had been sitting thus for a little while he broke out into a protesting speech.

"What have you been doing?" he irritably asked. "Are you in town for the evening?"

Daunton roused himself, his long white face gloomily set.

"Ethel's gone to see some friends. . . . I tell you, Vechantor, I can't stand this much longer."

"Stand what?" demanded Louis sharply. The sudden burst of Daunton's egoism, as though he had planned the opening, jarred him to an unbearable degree. "Aren't you happy?"

"Happy!" laughed Daunton in a lugubrious voice. "I know what you think of me. I can see it. But you don't understand. You're not a weak chap, like me. . . ."

"Aren't I!" Louis cried, turning his shoulder, his lids dropping. "It's funny what a difference there is between things and appearances." His tone was dejected, rather than angry; but his anger was appeased.

Daunton stared at him. To Louis the silence was almost unbearable. He could have shouted savagely, "For God's sake say something! Anything!"—but pride checked him. Daunton seemed to have no pride. He had come to tell his woe. Louis could not tell of his grief. It was too bitter. With Daunton the telling lightened the load, and he would complain, perhaps, all his life, in a voluptuous abandonment.

"Three weeks now since I left home," he resumed; "and there hasn't been a word from them. I might as well not exist. There's cruelty there. . . . Don't you think there is?" He did not wait. "Yes; there's cruelty there. I'm shut out."

"But you did it yourself, man!" said Louis suddenly. "You knew what it meant. You had your choice. You chose Ethel. Isn't she worth it?"

"Ethel! She's a brick. You know, Vechantor, she understands me. She does! And I'm making her miserable." Daunton rose to his feet and took a couple of

steps from the fire so that he could stand half-sitting against a table. "Vechantor, old chap, do for God's sake sympathise a bit. I ought to be as happy as anything. She's a real girl. Nothing like anybody you see in Beckwith. Nothing like those damned Hughes girls. . . . But there's this awful craving for home—I can't forget it. I feel I've done wrong."

"You haven't!" cried Louis. "That is, if you're fond of Ethel."

"Of course I'm fond of her. But we're both wretched because no letter comes. She sees me waiting for it; and she tries to cheer me up. Coaxes me; pretends to be gay. . . . It's no good! I found her crying last night. She said she felt queer; but I knew it was really because I'd been an impatient pig. I don't seem able to get my spirits going. I'm always wanting . . ."

"Oh, for . . . Daunton, my dear chap, I can't stand it! You decided to marry Ethel. You had to choose, and you chose. But you want both things. . . ."

Daunton did not answer for a moment. At last he said:

"I know it's too bad to worry you with it. But do you know you're the only friend I've got? Perhaps I'm not *your* friend. But you've been mine. Oh, you know it! I'm so devilish lonely. I can't go to anybody because when they look down their noses at me I get flustered and lose my temper. You don't do that. I can see you despise me; but you don't do it as they do. You're aggravated with me because you think I'm grizzling. They only think I'm funny. That's the difference. That's why I came up here to-night. I knew you'd be ratty; but anything's better than indifference. Anything. It's just what I can't bear—to think of them at home cutting me right out of their lives, as if I was infectious . . . as if I was a leper. And of course they

know it. It's the same old game. It's the way they've always done . . . always. . . . I could give you instance after instance, in my own life. . . .Vechantor, did you ever hear about me and Vera Hughes . . ."

Louis felt the blood flush his cheeks. When he was able to speak his voice was indistinct. He hoped it did not give him away.

"Something," he said.

"Well, there's a thing . . ." Daunton stared at the fire. "It was all her doing . . . I mean, she worked on me and said . . . Oh, she's a little cat. . . . D'you know, Vechantor . . . it's a beast of a thing to say; but I could have married any of those three girls. When I was a kid I used to go with Adela. . . . Then, when I was eighteen or nineteen there was the fuss with Vera. My word, she was hot stuff! There's something in them . . . I don't know what it is. . . . Now, of course, it's Judith. Mater had fixed it all up. If it wasn't the one it was to be the other. I can't stand Judith—not at any price. And I know the others too well. And the funny thing is that it's Judith who's being pushed off now. You couldn't see it, I expect; but to anybody who knows the game it's screamingly comic. Look at Dumaresque, now. He was mad about Veronica. . . . But that didn't suit Mrs. Hughes. She'd got other plans for Vera. Other plans, d'you see. But Dumaresque was to be hooked elsewhere. It wasn't Adela this time. I suppose she wouldn't. They were trying to put him on to Judy. To transfer him from Vera to Judy. I could see it all. I always did see it all; but I never had the courage to say so. . . . It's that that makes mater wild. She was in exactly the same taking about Vera, and I was sent to Coventry for a month. It was mad, I admit; and I know I'm a beast to talk about it. But there it is. She was always getting squeezed up in cor-

ners with me, and writing me notes, and meeting me in the lanes. And I was drunk with a sort of feeling that I was being flattered. I suppose I was in love with her. I don't know *what* she was with me. . . . Somehow that's what happens in Beckwith. They swaddle you all up, and you're bound to break out on the quiet; and then . . . no, they don't beat you, or shut you up: they're scandalised, and they show you you're not decent. They cast you out. And the devil of it is, it's so effective. It's not effective to keep you from going wrong; but it's effective for making you as miserable as hell afterwards. It's the *punishment* they're keen on. It satisfies their cruelty. They're malignant with cruelty, and instead of making you good they drive you away, and break your nerve for life. Mater doesn't care what happens to me, so long as I'm punished. They didn't care—not one of them—what happened to Vera; so long as she was punished. What's the result? She hates me. She's got the kind of nature that makes a girl get hold of a weak chap like me and despise him. She hasn't got the nerve herself to stand up to a real man: if she had, she'd be some good. If she got hold of a man who'd cut all meetings in the dark, all the hysterical little smothered kisses and cowardly secrets, she'd very likely fall in love with him and be a woman. Ach! They're all alike. All these Hughes girls. They've been forced into it by that beast of a mother. She's like my mother. They're a pair. Both as coarse and as cruel. . . . And she's treating me as if I was a leper . . ."

"For God's sake . . . For God's sake!" groaned Louis, stupefied with this incoherent raving, which was all the time wounding and bruising. "What on earth d'you think's the good of pouring all this out at me? It only makes me sick, and doesn't help you."

"It does help me. Look here, Vechantor . . . No,

old man: listen! I wrote to mother, telling her what I'd done; saying what a good wife Ethel was, and all that. I asked her to write and say she forgave me—only that! Not a word has come. Then, a week ago, I wrote again —just a note—saying how sorry I was not to have heard anything. I'm afraid it was a bit of a wail. . . . Well, I can't *help* it! But it wasn't abject!"

Louis groaned to himself. What was the good of talking to this egomaniac? He turned round in his chair, so that he could see Daunton, forcing himself to speak.

"If you grizzle, it's not fair to Ethel," he said. "You've no right to grizzle. And they're not worth it." He felt unbearable excitement rising within his breast. "I can't think what's the matter with you!" he cried. "You get married as if you were being sentenced. D'you think you don't owe something to your wife? Why, it's intolerable that you should be making her wretched because of these beastly people. Intolerable! She's given up everything for you: why not you for her? Why not? You make me tired! You won't kick back! Good God! You ought to be kicking me, and you're just mulishly listening. You ought to be scorning your home people—making a new home for yourself . . ." He stopped, breathless.

"I know," eagerly answered Daunton. "I know I ought—about making a new life. You're absolutely right, Vechantor. But then, you're different! You can *do* these things. You can live to yourself. I can't. I've got no resources."

"You've got Ethel!" flashed Louis. "Think of her, man!"

Daunton met his glance with lifeless, hopeless eyes. He slowly shook his head.

"I've always been weak-kneed," he said slowly, with a

hovering smile of distress. "I was brought up weak-kneed. Because it made me easier to manage."

Suddenly he dropped his pipe and put both hands up to his face, pressing them against his cheeks, his eyes covered.

V

Louis moved uneasily under this silent confession of shame. He could not look at Daunton. For Daunton was showing the despair that Louis could only feel. More volatile than Louis he was able to give expression to his sorrow; while Louis, in greater agony because misery, having no such outlet, went deeper and deeper into his soul, was torn between envy and contempt.

At last Daunton's hands dropped. Mechanically, ashamed of himself, he relighted his pipe and began once more to smoke. When he spoke again it was in a more ordinary voice.

"I'm not so badly off as she is," he said. "I'm too selfish. She's not. I see her watching me, not thinking about herself at all. I tell you, Vechantor: you ought to get married yourself. You've no idea what it means."

Louis winced. When that was all dead. When Daunton himself had added dreadful words to Louis's dismay. With an ironic, insincere attempt to bluster, insincere because his heart was closed against Daunton and his despair was corroding his sympathies, he retorted:

"You're the ideal picture of married happiness."

"I'm ashamed of myself."

"I think you ought to be," Louis admitted. "For hankering after old things."

Daunton left the table and returned to his chair.

"I shall be better now," he said. "You said you were

weak: you're not. I'll tell you why. There's something about you that makes me know you're straight. I believe straightness is the finest thing on earth. You're straight. I can say things to you . . . anything I feel; and know that even if you despise me you do it—not out of conceitedness . . . but out of a sort of well-wishingness. Oh, I wish I were you! I wish I had your strength! I'd be a man then!"

He was smiling now—a light in his face that made its haggardness disappear.

Still Louis could not confide. He did not respect Daunton enough. He was chained to silence.

"It's all illusion," he said at last painfully. "I like you. I'd like to help you. But what's the good of wishing? If I try to help anybody I seem to push them deeper in the mud. Besides, I'm impatient with you. I see you trying your hardest to make a mess of things."

"It's true," Daunton ruefully assented. "You don't like me very much, do you?"

"Oh, my dear chap!" protested Louis.

"Well, you're a good friend, anyway. You expect me to do my best. That's what friendship is. You make me want to get your good opinion. I mean, I think to myself: 'Vechantor wouldn't do that . . .' or 'He wouldn't think much of me if I did this.' If only you'd believe in me a bit more, I believe I could . . ."

"You've got Ethel to believe in you," Louis cried sharply.

Daunton hesitated.

"D'you think she's got any reason to do that?" he asked. Louis shrugged, and Daunton went on: "She knew I was weak. I'm disappointing her. I seem to say the wrong thing and make her miserable—make her feel she's done me an injury. Oh God! What it is to be a coward!"

"Rubbish!" cried Louis. "Don't start it all over again. Far better go home, say to Ethel that you're a fool but that you're not going to be a fool any more. Forget the people at home, and set yourself to make a new home. Oh . . . oh, be a *man*!" That was his savage conclusion, in a voice that brought the colour to Daunton's cheeks. Daunton rose again, and went to the door.

"I see," he said unsteadily. "All the same, you're a brick. You make me feel I can do it. Can I come again?"

"Yes; when you're grown up!" Louis said bitterly. He heard the door close. Then, as Daunton had done, he put his hands to his face, his cool finger-tips upon his burning eyelids, in unspeakable anguish.

vi

The next day saw the culmination of this phase of Louis's life. A certain large account—the largest in which the firm engaged—was periodically examined and analysed. This work had for years been done in conjunction by Louis and the firm's chief clerk. Upon this day of the month the account was due for analysis, but it was not as usual brought in to Louis. Meeting the chief clerk, Louis said casually:

"Oh, isn't this the day for Marchants' account?"

"Yes, Mr. Louis. But your father has been going through it with me himself," explained the clerk. "He said I wasn't to trouble you with it."

"I see," said Louis steadily. "That's quite all right, Mr. Steed. So long as it hasn't been overlooked."

He returned quietly to his room, his face the colour of ashes, and his fists clenched. For a moment he stood moodily by his desk. Then, with a bitter smile, he drew

from his pocket the bunch of small keys which he always carried. These he laid upon the desk. From the principal drawer of the desk he took some papers, which he destroyed. His calendar was awry: he straightened it, drawing his chair close against the desk. With no further sound he took his hat and overcoat from their pegs, donned them, and walked out of the room, closing the door softly behind him. His brain was quite active, searching in memory for any work left undone that might cause inconvenience in the office if it were not recalled; but then, as his work was always methodically completed, and as he could think of nothing unfinished, he left the building and was instantly lost in the crowd that presses all day backwards and forwards along Liverpool Street and Gracechurch Street.

BOOK TWO: LOVERS

CHAPTER XIV: THE REBEL

i

OUT in Beckwith the crocuses were just pushing their first green above the earth. There was a good deal of cold rain, and the earliest signs of the turning year were apparent to those who could recognise them. The days passed very slowly—a little lighter each morning and evening, a little more luminous while they lasted. In the houses life went on as usual; in the shops none as yet could tell the change of the season. Only in two shops were changes apparent. Flisk's, near the station, where the poor people dealt, was more crowded than ever with goods, but they were goods of a higher class than before. Peel's, in the High Street, although still well stocked with goods, was empty of customers. William Vechantor stood ever-ready behind his counter; Flisk had a smart new young assistant who called each morning for orders, mounted upon his bicycle and wearing an apron of which one corner was folded back and tucked into his waistband. What was loss to Peel's was gain to Flisk's. Flisk counted his money in secret marvel, and his books gave him a nightly delight. Already he was making ambitious plans for extension of his newly-prosperous business.

In the back room upon the first floor over William Vechantor's shop sat Dorothy, frowning over some accounts. Her face was very grave, her mouth drawn, and her brow puckered. Over her neat dress she had a

large dark overall that made her look like a child; in her hand she held a pencil. She was alone, gloomily surveying the wreckage of Peel's business. The bills did not give much pleasure to Dorothy. She had no need of her natural shrewdness to realise the position. The days went on, and orders were few; accounts had been closed; casual customers were now the chief feature of a business that had thrived upon its short-credit system. The outlook was bad. William would not let it appear so; but Dorothy and her mother, exchanging quick clear glances, knew that even his cheery and resolute spirit was showing signs of distress. As for Dorothy and her mother, they in private shook heavy heads, seeing beyond this mood of discouragement other moods of even greater difficulty. Already they were watching William's face as he examined the weekly returns from his Holloway shop. In that shop lay their hope, but even there it became clear that there might be need of greater energy, if returns were not to sink. More than once, lately, had William been forced to spend an entire Sunday with his manager, very seriously discussing the steps to be taken for more persistent effort.

Dorothy knew all this. She knew an extraordinary amount for her years. With her fierce, eager, ruthless temperament, she surveyed Beckwith and Holloway alike, summarily deciding their parts in the world of men and women. Beckwith was snobbish and pretentious: Holloway needy and drab. She walked in Beckwith's streets and lanes, recognising the people she met, criticising them, their taste, their bearing. Nothing was safe from her alert and fearless eye. The streets, the houses, the shops, the people—she criticised them all: she knew how she could improve all of them, and because of her youth and unconscious arrogance she betrayed the nature of her candid summaries. Beckwithians did not like her: they

froze, and looked sidewise at her with long retaliatory glances of hostility. It seemed to them such impudence that a grocer's daughter should dress like that and give herself such airs as Dorothy appeared to do. Really, what *was* one coming to! Well might Mr. Toppett speak of the industrial ferment! Old gentlemen, hearing their daughters so excited, shook their heads, saying: "Ah, Jack's as good as his master now. . . . It was different in the old days. You knew where you were, then. . . ." Everywhere the same first resentful comment persisted. It was almost as though the girl did not realise that she was being ignored. Almost, one might have said, it was she who carried her head highest of all. The ladies of Beckwith were the people who most resented Dorothy. They were often—they said—quite *amused* at the airs she gave herself. And when one says one is *amused* at anything, one generally indicates another emotion altogether. They wondered how long it would be before the shop was shut, or the business sold.

Dorothy, indignantly conning bills, had a subconscious awareness of this general suppressed malignance towards herself. It was not present to her, for her mind was busy otherwise. The lesson of the accounts was already fully known to her, and she was lost in a reverie. In that reverie was the strangest mingled yarn of a young girl's thoughts—ambitions, angers, sweetnesses, plans for the morrow, plans for the distant future, thoughts of clothes and beauties, music, food, and ideals, all were involved in her dreams, inextricably curled about each other as was the poet's love about the world. Dorothy's face was sober, but there was a tenderness in her eyes that softened her whole appearance. She was not thus the self-possessed girl who riddled the pretensions of Beckwith, but one much wiser and finer. Presently she

put down her pencil, and, leaning forward, rested her elbows upon the table and her chin within her two hands. Her fingers crept up until they pinched her cheeks, so deep in thought was Dorothy. She smiled to herself, and frowned, and smiled again.

"Why doesn't he come?" she was thinking. "Why doesn't he come? I want him to come!"

ii

And then her attention strayed. Often during her walks she met three girls, smartly dressed in the Beckwith fashion, which was almost, but not quite, the fashion observed in the West End of London, speaking to each other—when they wished to be or were likely to be overheard—in the drawling refinement of the suburbs. They always omitted the "r" in words: they said "yaw" for "your," and "faw-faive" for "four-or-five," and "eaou" for "oh," and "thawt" for "thought," and emphasised words such as "*so* sweet," in a superior way that made them the linguistic equals of all the best people in Beckwith, who observe this drawl with pathetic belief in tone and inflection. And every time Dorothy met these three girls, who were always together, and always wore these almost fashionable and sometimes pretty and tasteful clothes, she was conscious of limitless comparisons. She spoke more correctly than they did, she dressed on the whole more becomingly; but there was a spark of envy in her contemplation. Like all those who are rather different from their fellows she wished to have her cake and to eat it at the same time. She envied them their complacent conventionality, because, although she could not have so expressed it, they had a tradition behind them. She saw Adela and Judith and Veronica in their place in the

Beckwithian world. Only *she* was outside, something different; a girl, as they were girls, but a girl apart. Not for worlds would she have exchanged the character of Dorothy Vechantor for the character of any Hughes girl in England; but she envied them their lack of oddness. She wanted to be odd and not odd; she wanted to be able to say "Hullo!" to these girls, because she had no quarrel with them; but when she saw their unfriendly eyes her heart was hardened. She criticised them; the conventionality she envied in one moment she despised in the next. They seemed so content, and Dorothy so restless.

Thoughts of the Hughes girls pressed upon her. She could mimic them in her own mind, piercing their silly pretensions and scorning their unfriendliness. But the refrain in her mind was always: "Why am I different? Why do they think themselves better than I? *When they're not!*" If she spoke about this thing to her mother, Mum only tried to soothe her; so that Dorothy was irritated. There was nobody with whom she could so candidly discuss the problem as to bring to her wounded heart the relief of being comprehended. She was lonely: it is the penalty paid by oddness. Dorothy would not have relinquished her oddness for all the rewards of Beckwith.

One day she had seen a dear old lady walking slowly across the common. She thought to herself that she had never seen such a dear old lady; and Dorothy liked old ladies who were not moribund or malicious. This old lady had white hair, and a soft pleasant colour in her cheeks, and a sweet mouth and gentle eyes. At the first glimpse of her Dorothy felt strangely friendly, and wanted to nod and smile to the old lady. She walked briskly on, filled with a sense of the lovely day and the happy knowledge that in Beckwith there was one nice person; and as she drew abreast of the old lady she

looked sharply up, so as to smile at her. It was with a shock that she saw the old lady's head averted, so that their eyes did not meet. For many minutes Dorothy trembled under that disappointment. She was a child still, to be wounded by an unexpected and causeless lack of response to her charm. She quickly guessed the identity of the old lady.

Of Mrs. Vechantor, therefore, she thought sometimes in her musings. Of a puzzling Mrs. Vechantor who would have been so beautiful to know if Dorothy had not been her cousin! Of one who really would have nodded and smiled to the daughter of the grocer, but who would not risk giving encouragement to a possibly importunate relative! Dorothy thought of her as "Louis's mother," and in a sympathetic way was sorry for her; but that did not prevent a little trembling of agitation, of indignant pride, whenever she recalled that meeting.

And then back came Dorothy's thoughts to Louis. Her heart swelled because he had been their champion. All that weakness which Louis destructively saw in himself was hidden from Dorothy, or was transfigured in her eyes. She felt that he had meant to stand by them; she was ashamed to have rebuffed him at first. She exalted his loyalty, and even his resolution, which to Louis in his sense of failure had become so inglorious. His face appeared before her eyes. She reflected upon him, shrewdly, kindly, seeing a weakness altogether unrealised by Louis. She planned for him, as well as for herself. She planned work for him, a future; she was ambitious for him. Louis was worthy of something better than Beckwith, better than stagnation in his father's office. And it was Dorothy who was to inspire him. Contrary to all the canons of Beckwith, Dorothy, without waiting for the thunder-clap of a proposal of marriage, had fallen rather in love with her cousin. It was a love

different in kind from that of Beckwith girls. She did not see a home, and babies, and silver, and little dinner-parties. How odd! She saw Louis engaged in what she called "doing something worth while." She saw him using his brains, saw herself helping him, not for any accession of social importance to herself or to Louis, but for the love of the thing, an eager reaching-out to infinite virtue. She had slipped into it unawares, in the course of her broodings. It was a curious dream; but it made Dorothy smile with happiness. It made her forget Beckwith, and the Hughes girls, and Mrs. Vechantor. All she needed was the presence of Louis, so that her dreams might be put to the best of contact with actual possibilities. But wasn't Louis going to receive a surprise in this remarkable new crystallisation of his character!

iii

Dorothy sighed in the midst of her dreaming. After all, she suddenly understood, she was only a silly, poorly-educated girl. She knew she was intelligent: she could not help knowing that. Her rebelliousness came from the knowledge that she was better than her opportunities gave her any chance of showing. But the thought of Louis was not any ambitious hitching of her wagon to a star: it was disinterested. It was only eager and impulsive, not calculated. She had never met anybody like Louis. His strangeness drew her strangeness: he was odd, as she was odd. In her arrogance she almost shouted, "Thank God for oddness!"—never realising that the exaltation of oddness is the exaltation of anarchy and the beginning of a call for persecution. She was in conflict with a natural law. She was a rebel, glorifying rebellion. Is it any wonder that Beckwith instinctively felt Dorothy to be a dangerous person?

Back came her eyes to the books upon the table before her. Here were no dreams; but ugly illustrations of facts still more ugly. Bills that were for small sums; pages which were ruled off as things completed; a few bills that would never be paid. Another deep sigh shook Dorothy.

"Oh!" she cried. "If there wasn't all this money-grubbing in the world! If there were real love! Instead of this hatred! They call themselves Christians! Virtuous people!"

For a few moments she was very cynical. And then she heard the door beside the shop opened, and her mother's voice upon the stairs, and another, unfamiliar voice. Dorothy pricked up her ears. Not Louis! Oh, not Louis! But whom could it be?

iv

It was Mrs. Toppett, and Mrs. Toppett shy and smiling.

"How d'you do," she said; and shook hands with a Dorothy who was rather suspicious of this unexpected visitor. The clergyman's wife was a small pale woman, not very interestingly dressed, rather nervous in manner, with strained eyes that made her seem to be always putting the best face upon things in spite of incurable melancholy and lack of stamina. Mrs. Toppett proceeded. "It was so nice of your mother to take such lovely eatables to Mrs. Humphries. Poor old soul: she's so grateful! And your mother said you had found out about Mrs. Humphries and told about her; so I thought I'd like to come in and thank you, Miss Vechantor. I've been rather unwell, and so I haven't been round to my poor people for a week. And my husband's such a busy man that he hasn't been able to go himself."

She spoke rather quickly, as if she were embarrassed.

Dorothy softened, stiffening again only at the mention of Mr. Toppett, whom she had so often seen calling upon his richer parishioners.

"Is Mrs. Humphries better?" she asked.

"Much better. She wants you to go and see her again. She's been praising you to the skies." Mrs. Toppett meant only to be amiable; but Dorothy read patronage in this eager flattery. Particularly when Mrs. Toppett concluded: "She says you're better than all the doctors . . ."

"And tracts," added Mrs. William. Mrs. Toppett smiled ruefully.

"Yes: I'm afraid she *did* say that," she admitted. "But I told her how naughty it was."

"Do you like tracts?" asked Dorothy bluntly. A shadow crossed Mrs. Toppett's eyes.

"Well, I don't send them to Mrs. Humphries. The distribution of tracts is . . ." She stopped suddenly, and, with a charming ingenuousness, stepping a little towards Dorothy, went on: "It's not quite in my line. But you won't tell anybody I said that, will you, Miss Vechantor?"

Dorothy smiled.

"I shan't see anybody to tell," she said dryly. Her mother had gone out of the room, and she was alone with Mrs. Toppett. "The whole of Beckwith, except the poor people, thinks I'm poisonous."

Mrs. Toppett, with all the tact of the simple and good-natured person, countered that.

"*I* don't," she remarked. "And . . . well, it's not a thing one can talk about, is it?" They stood looking at each other. Then Mrs. Toppett sighed. "I'm as sorry as I can say," she gently added.

"Is your husband sorry?" relentlessly asked Dorothy.

Mrs. Toppett did not answer. She looked pleadingly

at Dorothy, and that glance, from a young woman to a girl, touched Dorothy more than any protest could have done. It was a request for tolerance, it was an apology, a rebuke. It softened Dorothy because it showed her the possibility that even a Christian might be a human being, which, in the swift assumption that the uncharitableness of Beckwith was characteristically Christian, Dorothy had been inclined hitherto to disbelieve.

"Are you going to have some tea?" Dorothy asked.

"Your mother was so kind . . ."

"Do sit down. I'll just move these books. . . ." Dorothy was all humility. Mrs. Toppett had shown her the way. Dorothy thought: "What a dreadful thing to be a clergyman's wife. And to love him!" Her eyes shone with pity for Mrs. Toppett.

V

"D'you know, I wish something could be done," Mrs. Toppett began. "It's so difficult . . ."

"About what?" Dorothy asked dangerously.

"I wanted you to come and play at our concerts. The poor people like them so much. . . . You *do* play, don't you? . . . Generally Adela Hughes comes. . . ."

Dorothy laughed slightly.

"I think the . . . the poor people would like comic songs best," she said.

"Ah, but we're trying to educate them to better things. . . ."

"Ragtime?"

"Oh no. . . . Ballads. . . . Of course, an occasional comic song. . . . Of course! Mr. Bastable comes over from Sevenoaks. He's *so* droll, and sings those charming songs of Albert Chevalier's. . . . And Mr. Dean gives us readings from Dickens, or recites something like

'The Raven,' or something well-known. And little Miss Corntoft plays on her clarinet. And Veronica Hughes sings. She has a very pretty voice, you know. She's such a nice girl."

"But you see, Mrs. Toppett, they're so frightened in case I want to . . . to pretend I'm not the grocer's daughter. And of course I feel I'm rather like a human being."

"Oh, Miss Vechantor!" Mrs. Toppett looked vaguely distressed. "I don't like to hear you talk like that. Surely we're not as . . . in these democratic days . . ." But she was constrained.

"I'm only judging by the way everybody has treated me since we've been here. I haven't wanted to scrape acquaintance with anybody; but I *have* felt rather sick at the way everybody's drawn their skirts away from us. I know it's principally because of our name. Still, when you speak of my helping at the concerts—I suppose they *are* liked,—I can't help feeling that if I were to come and sing or play the other girls would make excuses not to come . . ."

"I'm sure they wouldn't," cried Mrs. Toppett stoutly. "They're not like that."

"And your husband wouldn't like it."

There was a silence, an exchanged glance. Mrs. Toppett knew that Dorothy was speaking the truth; but she could not, in her impulsive wish that everybody should be friends, accept the horrible truth that there was no general atmosphere of friendliness outside the accepted radius of geniality.

"If I can . . . If I *ask* you to come. Will you?"

"I should like very much to come."

"And sing?" Mrs. Toppett's face brightened. "My dear . . . If everybody knew what a nice girl you were, they'd . . ."

"But I'm not a nice girl," Dorothy said. It gave Mrs. Toppett a shock.

"I'm sure you are," she answered. "And I don't know why you say you aren't. And you *do* think I'm . . . well, sincere . . . don't you?" She was very appealing.

"I think you're lovely," Dorothy cried sharply; and the tears started to her eyes at Mrs. Toppett's flush of pleasure.

"You see, I'm rather lonely, too, in Beckwith," said Mrs. Toppett, in a very low voice. "I feel as though I'd been buried alive . . ."

She was as shocked with herself as any Beckwithian, overhearing her, could have been. But Mrs. Toppett had always been subject to these impulsive bursts of indiscretion. She was one of those feeble women who are sometimes attacked by social panic and the longing for love that is more than peckish. And she had been in Beckwith for six years without finding a single open heart outside Apple House.

"That must be horrible!" said Dorothy in quick sympathy. Mrs. Toppett recovered herself.

"Don't tell anybody!" she whispered, with a finger to her lips.

Mrs. William appeared at the door, carrying a little white tablecloth.

vi

For the remainder of Mrs. Toppett's visit they talked of all sorts of indifferent matters, and the clergyman's wife impressed both Dorothy and Mrs. William with a sense of her extreme simplicity and good-nature. They both liked her, and were both subtly sorry for her. She was almost entirely without "manner" (Beckwith servants always doubted, because of this trait, whether she were really "gentry" at all); and when she spoke of her-

self it was without any of that anxious deprecating vanity that is so common in Beckwith. She referred to no canon, no bishop, no social light. All her talk was of her babies and her old home; and she seemed to convey the notion that she really liked sitting in a grocer's parlour and talking with two undistinguished persons. She left a very kind impression indeed. The little emphatic clinging of her hand to Dorothy's hand, and the backward glance of liking and trust which she bestowed at parting were as sweet and cordial as any sensitive heart could have wished.

As she went upstairs again Dorothy felt her heart mounting exultantly.

"How nice she is!" she cried. "How nice she is!" In a flash her mind turned once more to Louis, wishing that he could share this moment of happiness. Did Louis like Mrs. Toppett? Did Mrs. Toppett like Louis? Why, they had not once mentioned him! And yet Louis had been in Dorothy's heart all the time. She saw him in her mind's eye, cool and handsome, and the picture reassured her.

"Though I wish he'd take his moustache off," she shyly thought. "Beastly glossy little thing!"

Her cheeks felt warm at such criticism. Louis would not like such a thought in her. Would he mind it? How careful she would have to be, so that his feelings should never be hurt! Louis! Poor Louis! But where was he? Why did he not come to see them?

"I wish he'd come!" she thought. "I want him to come—soon!"

CHAPTER XV: BELOW THE SURFACE

i

BUT Louis did not come. He neither came nor wrote, and his silence, occurring at that time, deepened Dorothy's love for him as nothing else could have done. Had she seen him each day, with their comradeship established, love might have been a slow growth: deprived of the sight of him, Dorothy was aware of increasing desire, a preoccupation, a craving. She became stiller, more silent. Her expression was graver. She lived a great deal in a few days, thinking about him during her walks and during silent evenings. As she lay in bed, waiting for sleep, she turned restlessly, always preoccupied with Louis and only Louis. She, like Ethel, had never been in love before. She had had no juvenile love-affairs, none of those girlish intrigues that are carried on with so many little lies and subterfuges in every quarter of the civilised world. The mingled sweetness and anxiety of her thoughts, her extraordinary ignorance of Louis, gave a new reflectiveness to her character. It was not that she invented a new and romantic Louis: she resembled, rather, one of those devoted men who decipher ancient inscriptions. She "edited" Louis. She read meanings, she linked odd memories. It was young love; but it was deep and sincere love, that would last. She was very happy, with a curious pained happiness that was half made up of longing. She laughed sometimes to herself, only half-realising that she was in love, but

finding this new experience very wonderful and a cause of secret joy. It gave her life new significance, as though she had hitherto been groping blindly, without any clear aim. Now, that was all changed. All the vague purposes that had filled her attention had been synthesised. She saw life differently. It was not a matter of quick feelings any more; but a definite waiting, most sweet to endure. Ah, if Louis loved her! Even that did not matter: if she could only be important to him, such a value would be enough. How extraordinary it was that she had existed for twenty-one years without ever being aware of mystery in life! Mystery—why everything was shot and coloured with it! Every smallest thing was a part of love!

Sometimes she would feel deeply unhappy, as though a weight of despair were upon her. At other times, when the sun shone, when she heard lovely sounds in the opening freshness of the year, her heart expanded and a happiness that was wholly beautiful filled her being. She sang while she walked alone in the wide roads about Beckwith. She walked in the direction in which they had all walked together, reviving her feelings, recalling the sound of Louis's voice, and her own quickened interest in him. The road was beautiful and unfrequented: she had nothing to interfere with her memory. All was perfect and in strange accord. She had not lived until now. She had been deaf and blind. And Louis . . . A pity came stealing into her heart. Poor Louis! Dear Louis! When she was very solitary she spoke to him: it seemed to her that they had long slow conversations, beautifully intimate and secret; and in these imaginary conversations she learned new things about her own nature. They were not all good things: her reveries were never occupied with apologetics, because Dorothy was a realist, and had almost no senti-

mentality in her temperament. She loved, but she did not therefore hurry over the sense of her own defects. She was faulty, and she knew it; but she honestly explained those faults to the supposed and beatified Louis, so that, realising them more clearly, she found better means of restraining her faults. She did not wish to appear to him otherwise than as she was. But she wanted him to love her in spite of her faults, because that was the way she loved Louis. She wanted to say—I'm hard, and cruel, and selfish; but you're my dear, and if you'll love me and believe in me as I love and believe in you I shall be wiser and kinder and more gentle simply in trying to be worthy of your love.

It was a beautiful time to Dorothy, in spite of the shop, in spite of the houses filled with unhappy and ill-disposed people which she passed each day. Seeing her smiling as she passed, the people felt more friendly to her. They saw her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling, and the new clear happiness in her expression; and they did not dislike her so much. One or two of them began to smile back at her, to nod and say "Good afternoon." Mr. Toppett, primed by his wife, was one of these. He even, by some involuntary movement, raised his hat to her; and although on their next meeting he avoided seeing her Mr. Toppett very quickly recovered his coolness, and a friendly greeting between them became quite customary. That did Dorothy a great deal of good. It made her more charitable. Seeing Mr. Toppett friendly, other Beckwithians stopped her in the street. They were patronising, because they were self-conscious; but they meant kindly, and Dorothy's resentment faded. She was bright and merry in meeting them. Quite a new air came into her relations with about a dozen of them. Only the Hughes girls were still implacable. Dorothy could not understand why the pretti-

est of them looked at her with such unfailing hostility. At first she disliked her. Then, one day, she met Veronica alone. They passed slowly, and Veronica looked away, her face pale as marble, and her eyes glittering. "Poor girl!" thought Dorothy. "She's ill." She turned back as Veronica went on down the road, and Veronica also was looking back. Dorothy continued her walk, her head bent. "She's unhappy," was her next thought. "Not ill; but unhappy. Oh, how dreadful it is to be unhappy! Her eyes looked hungry. She hates me. I'm sure she hates me. I wonder why she's unhappy . . . Perhaps she . . . likes somebody . . ." Swiftly, Dorothy's mind turned that impulsive guess into a personal conviction. "I think she's in love—and doesn't know if he wants her. Perhaps she *knows* he doesn't. Oh, poor girl!"

ii

Young girls with their lives before them are often more patient in love than older women can bear to be. So Dorothy was able to live through those weeks of Louis's silence without the dreadful anxiety which later might have beset her. She was so modest, and yet so confident of the power of love and of youth, that she did not see the dark future with misgiving. It was enough to live and to love. Time would complete love's work. But once she had thought of Veronica as in love she felt only a blessed pity for her. Generously, she desired for Veronica the fulfilment of her dream. It seemed so hard, so impossible, that a girl so pretty as Veronica should vainly desire a precious gift. Dorothy watched for Veronica, noticing that there was no difference in her demeanour each day. Only a sort of cold contemptu-

ousness came from Veronica as they passed, but Dorothy read deeper, and saw envy. "She's unhappy. She sees I'm happy. She wishes she were happy . . ." ran Dorothy's thoughts. "I don't expect I've got much to be happy about. If she knew how little, she very likely wouldn't envy me. Poor girl. Ah, but she looks as though being unhappy hurt her more than it would hurt me. I can bear to be unhappy. I'm stronger than she is. She can't bear it . . . I'm stronger than she is . . ."

Dorothy had discovered a profound truth; but she had nobody to commend her for it. There was nobody in Beckwith who could have appreciated its profundity. She had realised that pain can be borne by those who are enriched by pain. Her pity for Veronica was based upon a true instinct. She was an observer. If Veronica had only known, Dorothy thought, she would have been less contemptuous and would have smiled back at Dorothy and begun a friendship. Instead, she began to avoid the roads that Dorothy was likely to take, and when they accidentally met Dorothy saw Veronica turn down other roads in order that they should not have to pass each other.

"I wonder if it's me she hates," she thought, "or just meeting anybody who looks sympathetically at her. Perhaps it annoys and troubles her. I wonder how I should feel . . . I should have thought unhappy people liked sympathy. Perhaps not when they're *very* unhappy. Perhaps she thinks it's rude of me to feel sorry for her. Poor girl. When really I only wanted to show that I felt kind. . . . I expect it's only because I'm the grocer's daughter. I wonder if Louis knows her. Perhaps she's a friend of his. I must ask him. . . ." That thought led to a quick sigh. How could she ask him, when he came no longer to Beckwith? A sharp restlessness seized her. What if he never came? Wouldn't she then feel

as unhappy as Veronica Hughes? Dorothy's eyes darkened with distress.

iii

She was content to go on loving, for the present. The passion for certainty that besets most people was not yet hers. She did not demand proofs. It may be that her nature had no need of them. To live thus, in a dream of happiness, was something so new that it was sufficient for all her waking hours. Only when she slept did dreams of Louis menace her contentment. Then came her hours of secret pain, when the longings of her heart were no more controlled by her eager interest in life. It was as though she suffered and learned deeper truths about her love, which otherwise was too sweet to be a cause of wounding distress. She awoke sometimes with tears upon her cheeks, and the memory of sadness. It made her shy; so that she could not exchange those frank confidences of old with her mother. Her mother had become a stranger: perfect frankness was no longer possible between them. Dorothy saw a cautious anxiety in Mrs. William's eye, hidden rapidly by a grotesquely tactful smile that only emphasised the anxiety and deepened the caution; and this new glimpse of her mother's love brought daytime tears of a sort of exultant pity and gratitude. "Poor dear!" she thought. "She's so mystified. . . . As if I were still a little girl. . . . She'll suggest a poultice! Poor old dear!"

The days passed, and no Louis came. The date of the concert approached; and Dorothy was formally asked to take part in it. After she had agreed to do so she saw outside the Church Rooms in which the concerts were given a large board upon which a local amateur had set forth in large script the large word "CONCERT" and, in smaller lettering, the names of the undistinguished

"artistes." Dorothy's breath caught at the sight. . . . "Miss Irene Corntoft, Miss Veronica Hughes, Miss Dorothy Vechantor . . ." "Miss Dorothy Vechantor . . . Miss Dorothy Vechantor." It seemed as though it were not her name at all; but the name of a strange girl in Beckwith in whom she felt a curious poignant interest. "Miss Dorothy Vechantor"—who *was* this girl? The name was the name she had borne since childhood; but the appearance of it in Beckwith struck her as an amazing phenomenon. She could imagine the inhabitants reading it. They, too, would be surprised. They would think "*That* girl!" They would be inquisitive; they would perhaps come to hear her. What would Veronica Hughes say and do? Would she come at all? How mysterious, how delightfully mysterious, it was! How frightened she began to feel! It was the most daring thing she had ever done.

iv

About this time, Dorothy had a surprising adventure, which carried her still farther upon the wave which had caught her up and was bearing her into the life of Beckwith. She had gone out one morning, because her work was finished and the day so tempting. She had walked far beyond the railway station, watching the little red shoots upon the trees showing faint traces of green. She had welcomed the gusts of sweet Spring wind which came sweeping gently through the still-black and hardly speckled hedges beside the soft road. And as she walked, catching glimpses of delicious white clouds driving below a blue sky, she had been thinking of Louis and of the approaching concert, and the beautiful weather, and she was so happy that her spirits were all on tiptoe with a kind of suppressed excitement. It was then that she saw upon the roadway, coming towards her, a poor old

woman who lived two miles down this road, in a small lonely cottage that stood by itself. This old woman did washing for a number of people in Beckwith, and she called for it and brought it back each week on a little four-wheeled barrow about the size of a perambulator. On this day she was carrying the washing in a great basket under her arm, and panting as she walked; changing the basket from one arm to the other, and setting it down in the roadway while she rested. She was a thin, bent old woman, and she was poorly dressed, with a big straw hat and brown bodice and skirt and a red kerchief. Dorothy, seeing her thus, hurried forward.

"Why, where's your wheelbarrow?" she asked. "You can't carry that washing!"

"It's broke, miss. The wheel's all bended in two by a motor," said the old woman, looking out from her russet face like an old gipsy.

"And didn't they stop? The wretches!" cried Dorothy. "How shameful! What are you going to do about getting it mended?"

The old woman shook her head.

"I'm going to ask Mr. Conrad, the wheelwright, this afternoon," she said. "I'll ask him if he can mend it for me. But I can't nohow wheel it, miss; for the wheel's all bended double in two and it's too stiff to move, it is. It's too stiff to move. But the washing's got to be took home, and so I'm taking it. . . ." She panted once or twice; and Dorothy saw the perspiration round her eyes, in the little creases there, and saw that her eyes were humid with tiredness.

"But you *mustn't* carry it. It's too heavy for you. I'll carry it," Dorothy began impetuously.

"Oh no, miss!" The old woman seized the basket. Dorothy caught her arm.

"Please!" she cried.

So each took a handle, and they walked with the basket between them; while the old woman talked about her vast age and her rheumatism and about what people had been saying to her for the last fifty years. And it was while they were walking thus that Mrs. Vechantor, gently rambling along the road, with the help of a stick, came upon them.

V

Upon this afternoon Mrs. Vechantor, seeing Dorothy smiling to the old woman, unconscious of observation, felt differently from that other day. She stood still as they approached, and Dorothy became grave, for she knew that this was Louis's mother, and a shudder of realisation ran through her. It was her first instant of real dread. This was Louis's mother, and Louis was silent. All her thoughts of him were a girl's dreams. This was the reality. His mother, however kind, had scorned her before.

She looked again at Mrs. Vechantor, who stood quite still by the side of the road.

"How d'you do?" said Mrs. Vechantor. "Why, Agatha; where's your little cart?"

The explanation began again. Dorothy stood, looking critically from face to face. From the brown, wrinkled face of Agatha to the pale and beautiful face of Louis's mother. She had answered in surprise Mrs. Vechantor's first greeting; but as Agatha's narrative proceeded she became shy and restless, ashamed to be standing there listening to the rigmarole for the second time. Then she heard herself referred to as "this young lady." This young lady had kindly helped to carry the basket from the crossroads. . . . Dorothy turned her clear eyes upon Mrs. Vechantor, and met a glance of slow scrutiny, not kind, not unkind; but thoughtful—almost, it seemed to

her, pathetic. The basket was lifted again. They were proceeding upon their way. Dorothy had smiled slightly, almost coldly at Mrs. Vechantor, and was glad to have left her behind; when suddenly she heard her name spoken.

"Miss Vechantor . . ."

Ah, then Louis's mother knew her! The basket was set down, and Dorothy turned back along the road.

"Did you call me?"

Mrs. Vechantor drew a long breath. To Dorothy's surprise she faltered:

"I'm . . . I'm going to ask you something. . . . I'm Louis's mother. . . ."

"I know," Dorothy said, almost accusingly But Mrs. Vechantor was clearly agitated, not at all the cold gentlewoman of Beckwith society. She could not speak for an instant.

"My boy . . ." she said, in a funny husky voice. "Can you tell me . . . Do you know if he is well?"

"Louis?" Dorothy said. "Aren't *you* hearing from him?" Her face blanched. "Oh . . . He hasn't been to see us, or written. I've been waiting and waiting . . ."

Horrorstruck, she gazed at Mrs. Vechantor. Both were filled with apprehensiveness.

"I've heard nothing . . ." said Louis's mother.

"Oh, he's ill!" cried Dorothy sharply, with such fear and pain that Mrs. Vechantor's heart jerked and her breath came quickly.

"You *know?*" she asked.

"No: I feel it!" Dorothy said. "Oh, what shall we do; what shall we do!"

The old woman was still standing by her clothes-basket some distance up the road, while Mrs. Vechantor and Dorothy, linked by their loving dread, faced each other in this new sympathetic alliance.

CHAPTER XVI: THE CONCERT

i

ONLY a few days after that memorable afternoon, when Dorothy and Mrs. Vechantor, by a common impulse, had tightly held each other's hands for an instant in parting, the concert took place in Beckwith. For Dorothy all interest in this event had lapsed. The excitement, even the fear, had died down. Her cheerfulness, now that she had this conviction of Louis's illness, had given way to heartache. The feeling of powerlessness, of being trapped, grew upon her whenever she thought of the impossibility of finding Louis. Letters had now been returned through the post office: his whereabouts were unknown. Useless to search for him in London. She was passionately helpless. Yet her days had to be spent in customary tasks, and she was forced to hide her dejection in case that should add to the continued difficulties of her home. She practised her music mechanically, knowing that she was giving it no attention. For her the birds had become mute, and the heavens dark. No more was it worth while to be friendly to the unfriendly Beckwithians. It was too great an effort, when her heart was so sore.

But the evening of the concert came; and she and Mrs. William walked to the Church Rooms together, seeing with rather subdued cynical pleasure the troops of other people ambling in the same direction. The Church Rooms were very near the common. They were very plain and

bare, lined with straight slips of varnished wood and lighted by yellowed bulbs of electric light. A low platform at the farther end was reached from the floor of the hall by a few steps, and the piano stood upon the right-hand side of the platform. A few potted evergreens and flowers had been lent by one or two of those churchpeople who had greenhouses; and the green curtains, which for children's entertainments were unsteadily hitched across a sort of clothes line, had been drawn far to the left and right of these flowers. The platform was bare, covered with a faded carpet. Sometimes, on less important occasions, the performers occupied the first row of seats: to-night they were being all accommodated in a real "green room" to the left of the platform, the passage from this room being concealed from the audience by an extension of the platform-curtains. It was to this room, accordingly, that Dorothy was taken, while her mother was seated in the middle of the audience, obscure and anxious for her daughter's welfare. And as Dorothy was among the first arrivals she was enabled to find a retired seat in the room from which to observe those who came after. The whole place had a stuffy or a mouldy air—she could not tell which—as though no outer breezes ever reached it and as though the shallow foundations of the building left enough room below the flooring for the growth of rank weeds and unpleasant herbage. Dorothy's brows were lifted in a whimsical disgust. Other things were bad enough; but this graveyard atmosphere told immediately upon the spirits. Her heart sank, a leaden heart that chilled her body and made her shiver a little. In a perfect fright she looked wildly around, her teeth slightly chattering. From nowhere in this dismal room came a distressing draught, like the breath of the dead, rising and choking her. The words of her songs rushed away, forgotten; the thought of facing a

crowd and singing such words brought warmth to her cheeks and again made her shiver. It seemed impossible for her to keep still. She had a horrible sense that nothing was worth while, that everything was equally and lamentably indifferent to her. She did not care if she never sang, if the concert were a fiasco. All she wanted was to go home, to have done with it. To make an end. . . . When she thought of Louis a long shuddering sigh caught her and made her press together two unfeeling hands. She was stupefied.

ii

And then other people came into the room. Little Irene Corntoft came first, with a long stupid-looking leather case and a roll of music for her accompanist. She was not a prepossessing child, and she carried herself with an appearance of conceit that alienated Dorothy. She shrank deeper into her corner. And then came Adela and Veronica Hughes—both fair, both chillingly ready to ignore Dorothy for the whole evening. Their coming did not improve the general festivity of this charnel-house. Dorothy watched them with unhesitating eyes, noticing their self-consciousness, their raised and drawling voices, the little half-glances that they could not help casting at her, in spite of their studied aloofness. To Dorothy this was all pitiable. It was like the stiltedness of those dull English people who will not speak until they have been three times formally introduced. Only when Veronica tried vainly to fasten long white gloves, while Adela was otherwise engaged, did Dorothy slip forward and perform the task. And when Veronica flinched and half-withdrew Dorothy thought suddenly: "She hates me. It's not only what I am: it's myself." She could

have told that anywhere, for she saw that Veronica really recoiled, from a physical distaste, and not from any impulse of pride. She would have said that Veronica had shuddered; and as she thought that she caught sight of Veronica's eyes, in which she read all that active dislike that she had guessed from the earlier recoil.

"Yes, but why?" Dorothy demanded of herself. "What have I ever done to her?"

iii

It was too much to decide in a moment. The sense only made her more wretched, for her sensitive heart was easily wounded and a slight rankled long in her bosom. She was conscious of no offence, save the one of coming to Beckwith. It was not as though she had sought Veronica, or fawned upon her; then, indeed, she could have understood a withdrawal, for she herself so withdrew as if by instinct, and not through coquetry, from any form of personal pursuit. Instead of pressing forward from any base wish, she had merely wished to be of use, to be commonly friendly. That was her nature. Yet she was rebuffed, as if she had been presumptuous. A little dry smile curved her lips, and her heart began to beat faster, as she went back to her corner.

"Nasty girl!" thought Dorothy, puzzled. "Why?" It was unanswerable. She had no clue.

Mrs. Corntoft bustled back into the room, exclaiming at Irene's uncovered neck. She was an ugly, impertinent woman, with a face like a peony, as though she suffered from an apoplectic affection.

"The idea!" she cried. "The idea! To stand in this cold without your fur! My precious!"

"Silly woman!" thought Dorothy. "Silly woman! How overdone!"

There was a spare-looking accompanist, a Miss Simmons, waiting with pathetic affability, ready to coax any refrain from the piano half-a-bar behind the vocalist, ready to struggle through any song to the bitter end, a little slow, one of those pianists who inevitably miss the exact moment for an emphatic chord. She kept a thin shawl over her head, as if she were at the Opera, waiting for her hired brougham. There was a middle-aged male singer, who was to perform the Prologue from "Pagliacci" and a horrible song-drama called "The Raft." It was for him that Miss Simmons was there; it was his doom that lay in the tips of her stumbling fingers. The room became full of such people, including Mrs. Toppett, fragile and excited about nothing, striving to be heard above the general talk, and screaming in her effort. The room was overcrowded. Its mournful staleness reached a point of close suffocation.

Outside could be heard the movement of feet, the squeaking of the legs of chairs. Laughter, and a loud buzz, and already some impatient stamping from the back seats . . . Dorothy held her hands close together, her face pale, her eyes a glowing black. Distress was visible in her whole demeanour, but the others continued to ignore her. Oh, she thought, if only it were all over! How blessed to be home again, away from these unpleasant people, alone with her grief. Louis! Louis!

A whistle arose from the hall, a long whistle made with two fingers in the mouth. It was repeated. A great stamping began, and a tick-tock clapping, to show that the audience was impatient. A flurry ran through all those in the green-room. Mrs. Toppett moved hither and thither in a timid frenzy. It was painful, as though they had no leader, as though suddenly they might all, through panic, run away and leave Dorothy alone. She felt a sense of unreality growing upon her: a faintness stole

into her consciousness. Her face seemed to be clamped with iron, and her lips trembled. If only something could be done! The stamping, the whistling, the clapping, began again. It was unbearable! Adela whisked a piece of music from her pile and moved quickly to the door. Then she dawdled—Dorothy saw her quick change from haste to a sort of public dawdle. The whistling ceased, and the stamping; the tick-tock clapping gave place to genuine applause. Then silence . . . a grating chair, a cough. At last a tinkle.

"Oh Golly!" muttered Dorothy. "*What* a piano!" She rubbed her hands with her handkerchief.

"Miss Vechantor . . . Oh, *there* you are!" cried Mrs. Toppett, darting towards her. They all stared curiously at Dorothy. "You're number two. Miss Simmons . . ."

The spare-looking accompanist came forward, hugging her shawl. At the touch of her bony hand Dorothy knew that this woman, a teacher of the pianoforte to young children, would be a melancholy accompanist, in spite of every variety of goodwill.

"Oh *please!*" she beseechingly cried. "May I play my own accompaniment? I'm used to doing it. I'd ever so much rather!"

"It means moving the piano!" objected the male singer.

They all looked condemningly at Dorothy, whose cheeks grew hot.

"Please!" she begged. Glancing up, she confronted a hostile Veronica, whose lip was curled with contempt that was half jealousy. It made Dorothy firm: they saw the determination mark her new expression, and gave way, frowning. From somewhere across the room, apparently in answer to a whispered inquiry, came the sound of a hushed voice that made Dorothy vehemently defiant.

"Grocer's daughter . . ." were the words she heard, that made her suddenly like a queen among them all.

iv

During the whole of the tinkling prelude, played by Adela with a feverish speed that indicated a nervous bravado as well as a contempt for the audience. Dorothy's heart grew colder and colder, until it seemed like water within her breast. Then came mild applause and a painful silence, long before Adela had reached the harbour of the dressing-room. That silence, so expected, but so profound, affected all those who waited. It was as if their teeth chattered. Surely with all their faults they were to be pitied for the nervousness which assails all who take part in amateur entertainments. They were nerveless, crushed under the weight of their good intentions and the rewards attending them. In such a panic nobody had sufficient energy to do anything but look angrily at Dorothy. She, just as Adela had done, looked wildly round for music, remembered that she had brought none, and walked out of the room and on to the platform. There was no applause—only a whispering, due to her identity. Then one pair of hands clapped, and there was a scattering attempt at welcome. Timidly Dorothy walked forward. To her dismay the position of the piano had not been altered; it stood so that she who sat before it had her back to the audience.

What was to be done? Dorothy glanced back. Her fellow-performers had gathered by common impulse at the door of the dressing-room. Mrs. Toppett made a wild gesture. No help was forthcoming. An anger caught Dorothy and mounted to her brain. With an energy altogether out of the usual she went to the piano, seized it below the keyboard and by the little hand-hole in the back, and tugged with all her might. It moved. It wheeled upon its casters. It obeyed her touch as if it

had been some mustang that a fine hand had tamed. In an instant, with another tug, Dorothy had brought the piano round so that when she sat she would be half turned to the audience. A tumultuous applause, won by her determination and her prowess, rang out from the farther half of the hall even while the gentry in the front rows drew up their eyebrows and grimaced expressively at such an unmaidenly display of muscle. The applause was as spontaneous as the wonderment. In a single instant Dorothy had become the heroine of the evening. It would not have mattered what she sang. She had shown pluck, and the more common part of Beckwith had responded with its appreciation. When she sang "Home, Sweet Home," without any of those trills which decayed vocalists are in the habit of interpolating, the more uneducated among those present, who loved their tawdry homes with passion, lost their heads. It was a pretty sight to them to see this little girl singing apparently with her whole heart the song they loved the best of all. They cheered and roared and stamped and whistled. The concert was a success; for the second person upon the programme to be encored with fury was a new experience in Beckwith. That her success should have been due to a piece of simple angry vigour made no difference to the audience. It was enough that they could have listened to Dorothy for half-an-hour on end without tiring. It was a great success; and Veronica Hughes, although she scraped through to a second song by means of extreme promptitude in return to the platform, must have realised that she was not prime favourite that evening.

What a lucky accident that nobody should have moved the piano!

V

With her songs given at the opening of the second part of the programme, Dorothy was free to rest or to leave the hall. Mrs. Toppett was all smiles and gratitude to her, pressing tepid coffee and cake in which stalks were as common as currants; but there had been no relenting on the part of the Hughes girls, who continued bleakly to regard the heroine. And then Miss Lampe came into the dressing-room. She came primed and bursting with news.

"Such a charming concert. So nice. Everything so beautifully arranged, dear Mrs. Toppett. Quite the nicest . . ." That was her prelude. There followed her item. "And just fancy! Looking round just now, I stood up in my place and saw everybody. And who d'you think was at the back of the hall . . . *so* thin and ill-looking . . . I shall never forget it. . . . Why, Louis Vechantor!"

"Louis!" Dorothy's heart leapt. It felt as though all the blood in her body had risen to her flaming cheeks at that word. She moved forward, involuntarily.

"He's gone!" cried Miss Lampe. "He was going out when I saw him. *So* strange . . ."

Her bright, malicious eyes travelled from one to the other, twinkling and glistening with triumph at her sensation. Dorothy, suddenly aware of their insight, deliberately dropped upon the floor a sheet of music at which she had been looking; but it was not at her that Miss Lampe had directed the force of her challenge. It was at Veronica. Very slowly Dorothy also found herself staring at Veronica, who stood with the blood flushing and leaving her face each instant, her eyes desperate, her mouth uncontrollably trembling.

Dorothy's heart stood still, and then began pounding. Something seemed to shut tightly within her, in time to prevent a scream from coming to her lips. She was shaken by a dreadful certainty. So this—this, after all, was the secret of that hostility which hitherto had pained her. The shrinking girl across the room, carrying the wounds of her heart plainly written in her agonised appearance, was in love with Louis.

"She's in love with him!" whispered Dorothy sharply, unable to keep the thought from escaping her lips. In that moment she knew despair.

CHAPTER XVII: SEARCH

i

THAT moment of stupefied despair contracted her heart. She had no longer any hope in life. All her buoyancy, all her enthusiasm, built so rapidly of gossamer, vanished in a dream. She was alone in the darkness, a faint roaring in her ears, magically remote and unhappy, a little girl longing only for the shelter of her mother's arms. Nothing was there to support her courage. Around her were aliens, enemies. Only she, with agony at her heart, stood staring across the room at this equally unhappy rival for the love of the only man who could solace her spirit. He was lost, as inevitably as if the word of doom had been uttered. Never in her life had Dorothy been so bitterly moved.

"Dear me!" tittered Miss Lampe, greedily devouring Veronica's too patent emotion. "Dear Vera's been . . . over-excited. . . . By the success, of course. . . . By the success. . . ."

Such glee, such malicious glee, was insufferable. While Veronica shrank farther back, white now as marble, abject before this comment upon her self-betrayal, Dorothy felt her colour mount. She was burning and blazing with indignation. Impossible to restrain herself. Love, pride, pity, jealousy—all these fighting excitements, like flames upon her valiant heart—rose tumultuously. She could not stand still. Trembling from head to foot, beyond all control, she took a sudden step forward, facing

Miss Lampe, carried to a height of anger that she had never before known.

"You beast!" she cried, in a loud, sobbing voice. "You venomous beast of a woman!"

"Oh . . . oh . . ." screamed everybody. Miss Lampe withered under her rage.

"Oh!" she gasped, in a state of terror. Then, with a kind of frenzy, she went on, wildly terrified, but still inexhaustibly malicious. "You too!" A nervous tittering seized her, not at all willing or deliberate; but only the over-drawn excitement of her shocked sensations. "He-he-he!"

She ran a few paces away, physically afraid of Dorothy. Veronica clung to Adela, gulping with dry sobs, quite abandoned to the hysteria of the moment. The others were all in movement, trembling and pale, their hands jerking as if with some dreadful malady. And Dorothy pushed past them all, to the door of the room, not knowing what she was doing, faltering and stumbling in her hurried progress. Her head was down, her fists clenched, her heart throbbing. . . Every thought had given way in her to indignation and jealousy and boundless hatred.

ii

In face of the audience she halted, not sobered, but deeply shocked at the confrontation. It so pointed the contrast between her heightened feelings and the strange setting for so bizarre a scene. Her anger did not so much evaporate as struggle with another and now overmastering impulse. She felt it an absolute necessity to find Louis, to reach him and learn instantly of his life, his well-being. To think that he had been there, that he had been present all the evening, without letting her know, without her knowing instinctively that he was near! Oh,

how strange it was of him, of her! But he was gone, they had said. That woman had said he had been going when she saw him. But perhaps she had lied! There was no truth in her—only stupid malice, the malice of the good and the malignant!

Quickly, ignoring her mother, who half rose at so hurried an exit, in spite of the singer on the platform, Dorothy made for the back of the hall. For a moment she stood, scanning the unknown faces near her, turned now to observe her movements. Louis was not there. Driven by necessity, she passed from the hall into the dark night. A fine rain was falling. Clouds covered the moon. All was black and forbidding. A breeze drifted across the common, rustling the bare branches of the trees by its edge. Everything was sodden with moisture. Breathlessly, sobbing faintly, Dorothy went running on beside the green. No conscious purpose had formed in her mind: her feet slipped in the mud of the road. She ran, sometimes splashing in water, sometimes treading firmly upon gravel, the wet earth clinging to her light shoes, soaking through to her stockings, to her feet. Mud splashed above her ankles, soiling her skirt and her petticoat. She had headed for the railway station. Down the long curling road she went, never stopping, borne by the impetuous desire of her heart.

With the station reached, dark against the heavy sky, with blurred lamps glistening out through the rain, and thin curving metals, splashed also with rain, throwing back the reflection of the station's many lights, Dorothy halted, panting. Her steps echoed upon the boards of the booking office, pattering as the wet soles of her shoes clung at each step to the drier wood. Then up the steel-shod stairs to the platform. All was dark except for the lamps, shining desolately amid the blackness. Empty, bare, cold, the station stood as if deserted. A gusty wind

came plucking her dress and her dishevelled hair. She ran from end to end of the platform, searching the gloom, crying in a low voice at every few steps the beloved name. Louis was not there. She was alone upon the station; she was bereft of hope. Her impulse had betrayed her.

With chill at her heart Dorothy stopped in the middle of the platform, crying. She was like a child lost in the darkness of an unfamiliar country. What should she do? She had lost him—for that night,—for ever! What should she do? What was there that she *could* do?

"Oh, Louis! Louis!" she cried to the wind and the rain.

iii

Had he been in the hall all the time? Had she missed him there? No, no! He had not been there; his face would have stood out from that white mist as her own name would have stood among a crowd of names. She was quite confident of that. Numbed as she was, Dorothy had no doubt of that. He had left the hall. Whither had he gone? Whither? Perhaps—home; back to the shop? Never! He would not have gone there; if he had dreamed of going he would first have come to her. She knew it. There was no hesitation at all. To his own home? Ah! That was it! But she *must* see him, if only for a moment. She must go there. She must satisfy herself.

Upon the instant of having that thought, Dorothy again ran. She was away from the station, out into the drizzling rain, with the fleetness of a boy or a very young girl, her little figure suddenly flashing under the lamps and immediately lost in the darkness. The bare branches caught her as she ran, sprinkling their burden of raindrops at the contact. She was unconscious: only she

ran on, her heart beating fast, her cheeks hot with the exertion; her hands and face wet with the rain. The hedges rose up black and frightening around her; but she had no fear. She had purpose.

Presently her energy failed, and she was forced to stop, her hands to her throbbing breast, her mouth dry. For a few instants she stood panting, the rain trickling from her cheeks, from her hair, on to her thin dress and within it, so that she felt it straying upon her burning neck. But still she could not stay: her need was too imperative. After that forced rest, she hurried on once more, no longer running, but walking as fast as her trembling knees would allow.

"That beast!" she was murmuring to herself, among the choking little sobs that hindered her breathing. "What a beast! To say that . . . Oh, but she loves him; she loves him!" Nothing more could enter her mind. Only Veronica's face and Miss Lampe's vindictive betrayal. A new horror of that sinister light shook Dorothy, weakening her. There was no love, no charity, among these people. . . . She did not think that; it was the burden of her aching heart. And the memory of Veronica so crushed her that at times she could not walk, but was forced to totter aside and clutch some firm support by the roadside, standing there in the rain, her pretty dress spoiled, her limbs aching and unsteady. Then, on again, cleaving the darkness, blindly and sobbingly directing herself to the Vechantors' home.

iv

So at last she reached it, exhausted beyond anything she had ever been. She had never been so tired, so mad and exhausted with rapid motion and the agitation of her feelings. She stumbled in at the gate, and half fell as she

pressed against the door. Without knowledge she pulled the bell so that a great billowing of sound echoed through and through the passages of that silent house. She was without sensation while the sound rolled away, while she clung to the door in exhausted reaction from the effects of her frantic exertion. And then, when the door was opened, she turned, all appeal, to Rosemary.

"Mrs. Vechantor!" she cried. "Oh, *please!*"

"Oh, miss! How *wet* you are!" cried Rosemary, putting forth a hand to stay her.

"I *must* see her!" Dorothy shrank from the hand. It seemed to her that she would even now be prevented from attaining her end.

"In the drawing-room. But——" Rosemary was incapable of the quick thought that would successfully have interposed her between this strange visitor and her peaceful mistress.

So it was that Dorothy appeared at the door of the room where Mr. and Mrs. Vechantor sat together. Looking up they saw her standing there, wet and muddy, her face scarlet, her hair so entirely soaked by the rain and loosened by the wind that it hung limply and heavily over her brow. Her feet were wet, her skirt and stockings soaked and thick with mud. Yet she was so evidently distraught that both Mr. and Mrs. Vechantor rose immediately and came towards her. Mr. Vechantor faltered, recognising Dorothy and embarrassed both by her appearance and her identity. Only Mrs. Vechantor, with a quicker sense of realities, came unhesitatingly and took both her hands.

"My dear!" she said.

"Oh, Louis!" cried Dorothy. "He's not here. He's not been here?"

She had lost all her strength, and collapsed upon a chair, trembling and crying. The disappointment was

too great. She could no longer bear the dreadful strain of her vehement journey. She did not faint; but she lost for a few instants all sense of her surroundings. All she knew was that her search had been vain, that he whom she sought was not here, that she was shamed and dismayed beyond bearing. In such collapse, she began again to cry, sitting there before them, her sobs tearing their hearts and echoing faintly in the silent room.

CHAPTER XVIII: A NEW FRIEND

i

AGAIN it was Mrs. Vechantor who stepped forward. Regardless of everything, she put her arm round Dorothy's shoulders and drew Dorothy's head to her breast.

"Poor child!" she murmured, too wise to misread such abandonment, too unselfish to put her own pain foremost. She, a woman first, read deep into the heart of another woman, pity drowning all her other emotions.

Slowly, Dorothy's passionate disappointment gave way before such kindness. Her sobs were lower, less poignantly heart-rending. She moved her head upon its soft pillow, drawing away, shame growing ever stronger as she realised where she was. Staring eyes sought those of Mr. Vechantor, eyes in which fear had its dominant place. At last she disengaged herself entirely.

"I'm so ashamed," she stammered, in a dreary, crying voice. "Oh, I've spoilt your dress. I've made it all wet."

That recognition made her look down, so that she first saw her own dress, ruined and soaked by the unrelenting rain. Unbelievingly she looked from her knees to her shoes, aghast at the discovery.

"Never mind. Never mind," said Mrs. Vechantor, in a broken voice. "Oh, my dear! As if it mattered!"

Their eyes met, Dorothy's afraid and shrinking; Mrs. Vechantor's wholly candid with a sympathy that was

true to her nature. They had no secrets now. Dorothy began, very low, to tell why she had come.

"He's been here?" interrupted Mr. Vechantor, no longer able to keep silent and conceal his love for Louis. "He's not ill, then? Thank God! Thank God for that!"

To all of them it was a relief to find their common joy expressed.

"You must go home and go to bed . . . at once," Mrs. Vechantor said. "Will you stay here?"

"No, no!" cried Dorothy. "I must go. I'm ashamed to be here."

Louis's father and mother exchanged a glance. At once, Mr. Vechantor went out of the room. He returned in a moment dressed for going out-of-doors, carrying for Dorothy's protection a hooded ulster belonging to his wife. She, meanwhile, had kissed Dorothy's cheek, warmly pressing her hands.

"Your mother will be anxious," she said. "But if you'll stay my husband will go and tell her you're here."

"No. I must go. Oh . . . you *mustn't* come!" Dorothy was horrified at the plan for her escort. "Please . . . *please* let me go alone!"

They would not do as she wished; and they forced her to wear the ulster.

"We must hurry. You mustn't take cold!" Mr. Vechantor said, in a moved voice. "Come along quickly." His hand was upon the door. He stood there, an erect old man, entirely forgetful of his position in Beckwith.

"I shall come to-morrow to see how you are," his wife added. "Good night, my dear; and God bless you!"

In a moment they were out of the house, Mr. Vechantor tightly holding Dorothy's arm and half supporting her across the common, back to her own home. That strange encounter was over. Dorothy had broken the barrier. It was down, and it could never again be raised.

ii

There remained her own family before that night was ended. While several families in Beckwith engaged themselves in repeated descriptions of the calamitous happening, for they had been shaken to their depths by the scene in the dressing-room; while Miss Lampe prayed that forgiveness should be accorded her young denouncer; Dorothy was brought home and the two elder male Vechantors met for the first time. Only for a moment did that greeting last, while Dorothy was introduced once more to warmth and light; and then, with a hot bath and clean dry clothes that mercifully enwrapped her and produced sleep,Dorothy was put to bed, as if she had been a wayward child who had run away and had been brought back unharmed to her proper guardians. The escapade was ended. Only its consequences were to be endured.

In the morning Dorothy was stiff and rather feverish. She could not get up, but was forced to lie in bed, her little face showing above the coverlet like a flower just peeping at the sunshine. It was thus she lay when her mother first came into the room, trying hard to smile reassuringly in spite of the dread of her girl's illness. Mrs. William was a good mother: she moved quietly, but not with that creepingness that is more irritating than honest noise. She sat upon the side of the bed, and looked at her daughter, and felt her warm hand.

"Have you got a sore throat?" she asked abruptly; and made Dorothy laugh.

Dorothy's mind, emerging from heavy slumber, was only beginning to revive the memories of the previous night. The sick shame which was to come later had not yet pierced to her consciousness. She was still drowsy

and enervated, with too little strength to bear the agitation of thought. Gropingly, she felt in memory for the cause of her weariness.

"Louis?" she suddenly cried, in a voice the hoarseness of which gave her mother fresh cause for her secret anxiety.

"He came here two minutes after we'd started for the concert," said Mrs. William, quite unconscious of her momentous information. "Wasn't it a pity!"

iii

Dorothy's eyes closed. It was too much! He had been to see her. He had come at last, and unkind accident had provoked the rest. Ah, that brought all her pain back with distressing vividness. The concert, the piano, the dressing-room, Miss Lampe, Veronica. . . . She was shaken from head to foot by the sense of calamity. If only she had been at home, had not seen Veronica, she would still have been happy, and free from the intolerable sense of tragedy that froze her heart. She would still have been so happy!

"He's been ill . . ." she said, in something hardly above a whisper. It was not a question.

"Yes, your father says . . . I wonder if you'd better talk. . . ." Mrs. William was very dubious, afraid to show her fear, and yet stirred by the sense that Dorothy was ill. Only she could see the flush upon her daughter's face and hear the quick, unsteady breathing. "You see, dear, it's . . . If you're not feeling quite well . . ."

"No, mother. I'm perfectly well. . . ." Dorothy moved her head restlessly, irritated by this strange hesitation. "I must know about it. Just tell me, dear."

"He's been ill for three weeks; but he's better."

"How does he look?" It was insistent. "Is he coming again?"

Mrs. William looked at Dorothy with a new steadiness, a new baffled concern.

"Your father didn't say . . . I think he said he looked poorly. He'll come again, my dearie. He'll come to-night or to-morrow. But you must lie quiet now, and be quite well. . . ."

"Oh!" exclaimed Dorothy, in fretful annoyance. "It's absurd to think I'm ill. I'm tired. But I want to see Louis. Ask father if he's really better. . . . Oh, mother: it was so awful last night. . . ."

"Don't *talk* of it, my dear. It only excites you. Tell me later. Now I've got to go and get your Dad his breakfast. I mustn't stay. I'll come and tell you about Louis. . . . Do you think you could fancy an egg? How'd you like a nice egg and toast?" She was beaming now, back in the safety of her own true sphere of nursing and unselfishness. Coaxing Dorothy with a simple dish made her feel that she had her back again as a little girl, the idealised little girl of memory. "I'll get your Dad to come and tell you about Louis."

With a quick, gentle movement she smoothed the coverlet and put a light hand upon Dorothy's brow. It was such a pleasure to see her face full of tenderness, and if the hand was hard and roughened it was none the less as gently caressing as that of one who had never worked with her hands. There was deep understanding between these two, confidence and love, which no momentary concealment could ruffle. Mrs. William had never forced any recital from Dorothy: she had never any need to question the sagacity of her natural and instinctive trust. She was not as intelligent as some women, but she knew more.

iv

An hour later, Mrs. Vechantor came to see Dorothy. She walked across the common and was seen by Beckwith to enter William Vechantor's shop. By the afternoon it was all over the town, and the town was agog. Mrs. Vechantor had entered the shop. She had no idea of the effects of such a humane visit. She had come to see Dorothy, and was led to her bedroom as if she had been an ordinary visitor.

Dorothy, knowing that Mrs. Vechantor was there before she actually came into the room, slipped deeper into her bed, overcome with embarrassment. What *must* Louis's mother think of her? She had a sudden vision of her bedraggled appearance of the previous night. She saw none of the beauty of it. She could not tell that even her ignorance of the rain and mud had made an immediate appeal to Mrs. Vechantor, so entirely innocent had been the devotion shown by such freedom from self-consciousness. All Dorothy remembered was that she had broken upon the pair in a dishevelled state, hysterical and contemptible, lost to all superficial decency—a stranger without claim upon them, who cried and sobbed. Who spoilt Mrs. Vechantor's dress! Even her shoulders burned, so deep was her shame. And when Louis's mother sat beside the bed, and in her gentle way smiled so kindly, Dorothy was lost in a limitless confusion. She could not speak.

For a time Mrs. Vechantor talked a little to Mrs. William, asking after the invalid's health—as if it mattered! thought Dorothy savagely. Then, as Mrs. William retired, she turned to Dorothy, no longer speaking, but looking as though she understood everything that was in her young cousin's mind.

"I think it was awfully brave and kind of you to come last night," she began quietly.

Dorothy moved impatiently, unable to bear such kindness.

"It was selfish," she said, in her hoarse voice. "You don't know how ashamed I am."

"On the contrary," replied Mrs. Vechantor. "It wasn't at all selfish. I'm not going to let you pretend that it was. Most girls wouldn't have been brave enough to do it."

"Most girls would have had more . . ." What could Dorothy say? She had thought "modesty."

"Oh, I can't be bothered with most girls," cried Mrs. Vechantor, with a sudden, unlooked-for breathlessness.

V

"I can't tell you how bad I feel," said Dorothy. "As if I couldn't face anybody."

"Suppose you tell me what happened," urged Mrs. Vechantor. "Because, you see, I don't know. I didn't properly understand what you said. All I know is that you came last night; and I'm sure that part of your feeling was to reassure me about Louis. You may not think it was; but most girls wouldn't have taken the risk of seeming peculiar. So I know that you have nothing to be ashamed about. I want you to believe that, because it's quite true. I know what girls are; or, at least, I think I know."

Dorothy listened, feeling healed at such words, but shaking her head at the interpretation.

"No," she said, with pressing candour. "You don't understand what happened. . . . She told the story of Miss Lampe, and of her journey to the railway station, and of her frantic run to Apple House. "You see, it was all selfish," she concluded.

Mrs. Vechantor looked at Dorothy with a singular expression.

"It was certainly rather unconventional," she said after a pause. "Perhaps, socially, it was unwise. I think it was."

"Ah, you despise me!" cried Dorothy, in agony. "I knew you would."

Mrs. Vechantor hesitated.

"No. I don't despise you," she answered, in a rather thrilling voice. "Only I'm very ashamed of myself."

"You!" Dorothy was aghast.

"Because it's all my fault," Mrs. Vechantor claimed. There were tears in her eyes. "It makes me feel very uncomfortable." She sat, thinking deeply, and then sharply sighed. Dorothy, now that Mrs. Vechantor was not looking at her, was able to watch her expression. Although deeply miserable, because of her own indiscretion, Dorothy was not therefore bereft of the power to sympathise with others.

"I'm so awfully sorry for you," she said impulsively. "We've done nothing but make you uncomfortable ever since we came here. You know we've all along been sorry and ashamed about it."

Mrs. Vechantor was again deeply moved.

"My dear," she said. "I think you're a very honest girl. I'd begun to think there weren't any left in the world. I wish you'd try to think of me as . . . as . . ." She could not proceed.

It was Dorothy who withdrew her hand from under the bedclothes and patted Mrs. Vechantor's hand. It was an uncontrollable movement, full of pity that rose in Dorothy's swelling heart. She who had come to sympathise with an eager girl, carried by affection into tempestuous activity, found herself enveloped in the strong little love that lay hidden behind Dorothy's piquante pride.

If she smiled, Mrs. Vechantor at least had a small sob in her throat, partly from a naïve response, partly from a painful amused sense of incongruity.

"You're splendid!" said Mrs. Vechantor. "I'm sure you are!" In her own mind she gravely added: "But I'm so dreadfully sorry for you. Because you've started Beckwith off afresh. I'm so dreadfully sorry for you. Poor child!"

She had reason to be sorry for Dorothy. But Dorothy had a new friend.

CHAPTER XIX: PAIN

i

DOROTHY thought: How nice she is, and how lucky I am to find her so nice when she might have been so nasty. Because it was idiotic of me to go running about like that. I must have been mad. Oh, I'm mad . . .

Nothing could equal her shame. Nothing could appease it. She was swallowed up in shame. She saw again the group in the dressing-room. She heard her own voice saying: "You beast. . . . You venomous *beast* of a woman!" The memory made her catch her breath, so horrible was it. It was not only the folly of such vehemence, although she now saw how useless it had been, and how it must have diverted attention from Veronica to herself. It was rather the unavailing anger of it that was in retrospect so crushing. How, by any such means, alter Miss Lampe, or hinder the growth of her malicious interest in any girl or any girls who were in love with a young man?

In love! Why should this love be something so secret, so shameworthy? Ah, but it was rightly secret. And to betray it was the worst thing a girl could do, so long as human beings were as inquisitive and as spiteful as they were. *They* didn't love; they only spied out weaknesses, because weaknesses were the only things they observed with delight. They wanted to see and to magnify weaknesses because the weaknesses of others in some disgusting way enhanced their own self-complacency. Qual-

ities made them envious; defects gave them a sense of power. Miss Lampe was like that. Her life was spent in a venomous search for the weaknesses of others. It was her sole interest. How Miss Lampe must be chuckling, with two girls exposing their secrets to her eye! It must have been a red-letter day in her life. Miss Lampe! Perhaps, once, she was in love herself. Never! Nobody could ever have loved her! Perhaps she had found enough weaknesses in one man to mark him down for her own; and then perhaps, after all, he had escaped? No: it all lay deeper than that. Miss Lampe must always have been ugly and envious, like Cinderella's wicked sisters. She must have pried everywhere as a girl. All her power in Beckwith was due to her malicious concern with the affairs of other people.

Poor wretch! She couldn't be happy. She could never have known what it was to love anybody at all. Living there, and souring for want of love, she must have gone out to seek it, and found everybody drawing suspiciously away from her; and so she must gradually have fallen into spite and nastiness. Very likely she had wanted to get married. When girls did not get married they became unhappy, and unkind, and morbid; and then they watched other girls, other people, and envied them, and scratched them. . . . Dorothy almost would have pitied Miss Lampe if her own personal hostility had been less great. As it was, she hated Miss Lampe.

And Veronica? Dorothy's shame forsook her in thinking of Veronica. If she hated Miss Lampe as a base woman, she hated and feared Veronica as a rival. She was so pretty . . . Oh, she was so pretty. Veronica's face was mirrored before her as she lay there with her eyes closed. She could see the fair, wavy hair, so soft, so powdered with lovely gold. She saw her delicate colour, her pretty mouth and teeth. He couldn't help loving

her, just for her prettiness, and because she loved him. Secretly, almost below her consciousness, Dorothy saw Veronica with another vision. She saw hard eyes and a hard thin mouth. She saw a horrible eager determination in Veronica, that was cat-like in its intensity. In that vision Veronica's prettiness became a mask. She became feline, soft and demure without, cruel and selfish within. Dorothy saw two Veronicas. One was the Veronica who suffered: the other was the Veronica who would do anything—however unscrupulous—to avoid suffering, to attain her happiness. Dorothy knew she need expect no mercy from Veronica. Well, in thought, she had none to give. Her thoughts were entirely cruel. She saw Veronica laying little traps. She saw her dishonest and treacherous . . . and Louis so guileless, completely deceived by the outward show of pretty appealing humility. Oh, Veronica would win. She was the sort of girl who did win. She was pretty, selfish, alluring.

Dorothy plunged at once to a sense of her own unworthiness. She did not deserve to be loved. She was not pretty, or charming, or clever. She had no quality to attract Louis. Only a sharp tongue and a rude manner. Who could tell that under the surface lay her loving heart? She might try to reassure herself by claiming to be honest, to be real, while Veronica was only a sham; but the dreadful lack of self-confidence for such a rivalry weighed her down. She had none of the aplomb that a girl required to attract men. She was only an ordinary girl, after all. Even without Veronica, Louis would never have seen anything in her. There was nothing to see: only an aching heart and that sort of eagerness which she had thought to be character. She wasn't any more real than Veronica. She was less real, because she loved truth, and the love of truth was incompatible with the life of every day. If you loved truth

you were a prig; everybody disliked and despised you because they felt you in some way superior to themselves . . .

Dorothy tossed and groaned upon her bed—not with bodily pain, or with any effect of chill from her escapade in the storm; but simply from the agonies of hatred and jealousy and despair. She had slipped so happily into love; and this was her awakening to the fact that love is not all that is needed for happiness. Loving and giving, as an ideal, was useless, she felt in her distress, so long as it was all upon one side. Unselfishness—ah, she knew her own selfishness. Only unselfish people know how selfish they are: it is for the selfish ones to proclaim an uncommon virtue.

ii

The day passed. Dorothy's thoughts made her feverish, so that her temperature rose, and she lay flushed and exhausted while Mrs. William went quietly about with a sober face. William also came into the room, upon tiptoe, and looked at his daughter. To them she was priceless, the unique treasure of their lives. Not even Reg., proud though they were of him, was more beloved. Dorothy had been their first child, the child of their most perfect happiness; and old joys were associated with every thought of her. To them she was both beautiful and precious. Her illness, or her unhappiness, these alike concerned them as nothing else could have done. They loved her.

When either of them came into the room, Dorothy, terrified in case they should want her to speak, lay quite still, watching them as a sick animal might have done, her eyes strained and dark. Even the clear love that radiated from them made her feel the more unhappy. She

thought herself so unworthy of love. It touched her and maddened her, in such a state of self-contempt as she was. Over and over again she thought of all the horrors her brain had conjured. She thought ceaselessly of Veronica, picturing her as she had appeared at every meeting. She imagined her with Louis, unhappy, happy; she saw her wooing him with a thousand little graces. Only Dorothy could catch the falseness that lay behind: Louis would never know. He would never know until after marriage, when gradually the glamour would die, when he would slowly awaken to the sense of such silken threads wound about him unbreakably. Enmeshed, he would lose his strength. He would find himself a prisoner. Dorothy could see him older, graver, steadfastly loyal but all the time groping to a sense of Veronica's evil. When she allowed her imagination thus painfully to create the scenes of Louis's captivity, Dorothy could hardly restrain herself from screaming. When she was quite alone in the room, and nobody could hear her, she could not help groaning, so great was her anguish. To see him in love with Veronica—how could she bear it! When she herself loved him so. When she would have sacrificed her own life to make him happy.

And Louis must never know that she had loved him. Not for Dorothy's sake, though many girls suffered deeply through their pride; but because if Louis learnt the truth his chivalry would make him pity her so much. She was not afraid of his scorn or his triumph in such knowledge: she was afraid of his pity. Oh, she could not bear it. Better death than such commiseration! It would be intolerable. Then a horrible base thought stole into her mind—to show him her love, to win him through pity, relying upon time and unswerving service to re-establish her claim to his respect. So must many girls have won their lovers—by little appeals for pity, by

hints of unhappiness at home, and tales of being misunderstood and ignored. Dorothy could not resist this impulse, because she was ill, and wretchedly unhappy. For a few minutes she was breathless under temptation, lying there with her head covered, her heart beating wildly in her throat, her temples throbbing. Her hands stole to her lips, and she pressed them fiercely with the tips of her burning fingers. . . .

iii

It passed. The nightmare of wicked impulse died away, leaving her trembling and shivering as if with cold. Frantically she turned again, moaning with despair. Her body felt as though it were on fire. When she parted her lips to breathe deeply her tongue cracked with dryness against the roof of her mouth. Whatever pain she had felt hitherto was nothing to this new sense of passionate humiliation. The anger with Miss Lampe, the unsparing jealousy of Veronica, were nothing in comparison with her new fierce scorn of herself. She did not deserve to be loved, or pitied: she deserved only to be despised, for the base creature she had become in imagination. Panting, Dorothy stared at the wall beside her bed, the flowers in its pattern weaving fantastically into great eyes of disapproval.

How long her agony lasted she did not know. It was a numbing torment that left her exhausted. When her mother next came into the room Dorothy could not bear her face to be seen. It was as though all the bitter, abominable secrets of her tempted heart were written plainly there, shamefully. She would never forget those hours. They would haunt her.

iv

Louis came at night, and Dorothy was too ill to get up. At first the disappointment was so great that terrible hysterical sobs shook her; but she conquered them, her throat and eyes burning. Her hands felt wasted, as they might have felt if she had kept them in water in which soda had been dissolved. They were hot and unpleasant, and when she touched her face with them she had no feeling but one of shuddering repulsion. Her mother, coming again a few minutes later, found Dorothy lying hopeless, staring at the ceiling; and with some sort of faithful inspiration she brought Louis into the room. So the two of them met again, when so much that was distressing had happened to both; and they were both so changed in mind and attitude from what they had been at the first encounter. Dorothy was sightless. She could not see Louis; she dared not look at him. All she knew was that he was there, and that he was talking to her. What he said she could not tell. Her mind was pounding out his name over and over again—Louis, Louis, Louis. . . . She lay silent, and it seemed to her that some voice deep within her heart was uncontrollably screaming.

But he was there. Later she would know what it meant to her. Then the knowledge of his presence would assuage her shame. It was too soon for his nearness to bring such blessed relief; but already the sick longing of her heart had begun to be appeased. All the weeks of waiting were summed up in her present sensation; and the quiet voice of Louis, and the feeling that he was there, and the subtle tranquillity bestowed by the mere contact with the beloved, would eventually bring rest to her troubled spirit.

Mrs. William stood at the foot of the bed, her arms resting upon the bed-rail; and Louis sat on a little chair from which he could see Dorothy's brow and her dark eyes, which never moved, whether he spoke or was silent. He seemed to go on talking; but Dorothy could never tell what he was saying, and only heard his voice as the most soothing music in the world. She lay perfectly still, her hands hidden, her face slightly turned. It was only at the last that Mrs. William caught sight of glistening tears in the sombre eyes; but she was completely puzzled, and did not know how to act or what to think.

"So I lay there," Louis was saying; "and they came and looked at me and whispered and felt my pulse; until I began to feel quite frightened that they thought I was going to die. I didn't want to die. It seemed so ridiculous to think of dying . . ."

"I'm sure it did," Mrs. William put in hurriedly. "What a thought to have!" She evidently did not like the word "dying": it sent a shudder through her, and she would talk lengthily rather than have it repeated by Dorothy's bedside. If Dorothy should get the word into her head! It was a nasty, sticking word. But Dorothy was not conscious of what Louis was saying. She did not realise that Louis was talking of his own illness. Her hearing was blurred; there was a dancing in her head. She was having to hold herself wholly rigid in order that she should not begin to cry with a feeble causeless joy. But still she could not bear to look at him, though the blackness before her was giving way to a glimmering of light and courage.

"I dare say you're still feeling very poorly," Mrs. William proceeded. "You must take care to wrap yourself up well, because it's when you're weak from lying in bed all those days you're liable to take cold as easy . . ."

"Oh, I'm well wrapped up," Louis said reassuringly.

"This room's none too warm . . ." Mrs. William busied herself suddenly with the fire. "Yes, we've often spoken of you. . . . We couldn't understand why you didn't come; and Dorothy's letter was returned——"

"Did you write?" asked Louis.

"Well, after seeing your mother that time, she did," answered Mrs. William, after the slightest pause.

"My mother?" Louis exclaimed, with an eager air. "Poor mother! Did you meet my mother, then?" He seemed bent on making Dorothy speak. "And you're friends."

"Indeed, yes; Mrs. Vechantor's been here to-day . . ." cried Mrs. William. "Mr. Vechantor brought Dorothy home last night . . ."

"My father?" Louis was completely mystified. "But how excellent!" He looked from one to the other. "You know, I'm so awfully sorry to find you so ill . . ."

"Oh, she's not what you'd call *ill*. Just a bit feverish . . ." Mrs. William hastened to say.

"She *looks* ill," Louis unwisely ventured, and could then have wished to withdraw the words, at her quickly shaken head of warning.

Dorothy spoke at last, in a thick muffled voice that he could not have recognised.

"You must go and see . . . your mother," she said.

"I'll go to-night. But I want to hear all your news; and I can see you're not up to giving it this evening. I must come again. I expect you're blessing me for . . ."

"The idea, Louis!" cried Mrs. William anxiously; but evidently relieved by his movement.

"Don't go!" murmured Dorothy. "It's not . . . not tiring me."

"Shall I?" He interrogated Mrs. William. "I don't want to wear her out."

So he stayed a little longer; but Dorothy, although now flushing with secret happiness, and oblivious of everything except his nearness, continued to lie there without sign. Only her mother could see that the dark agony which had appeared in her face was lessened, and its place taken by an expression that, if not happy, was at least free from the desperation which had earlier been so disquieting.

V

At last Dorothy was alone, and Louis had gone; and she was able to lie there with her precious memories of his visit. She did not now think of anything, but as tears stole gently from her eyes she felt that her wickedness had vanished. She was not wicked any longer—wicked in a mean way, such as she had always despised. She was unhappy, and unworthy; but she was not wicked. And nothing was so bad to bear as her self-scorn, which had so humiliated her. After a time she even began to be less unhappy, and once she smiled secretly to herself—not at anything, but just with a return of spirit that was so welcome after her day of dejection. It was the old Dorothy reasserting herself in that smile. It meant nothing so far as the future was concerned, excepting that Dorothy's courage was returning. She was feeling better. It was as though blood were flowing back into a numbed limb. Thereafter she was able to move freely, and to wipe her eyes.

"Oh Louis!" she said at last, very privately, to the safe receptivity of the pillow. "If there should happen to be a God, which—after Beckwith—I can't think . . . I could wish there were, so that you might be blessed, my dear. My dear!" She exulted in her daring at calling him "my dear!" She could not have done it at

any time earlier in the day. She went on thinking loving thoughts of Louis. Then she was shaken by an uncontrollable little laugh. "I'd so like to see his solemn face if he knew I thought of him as a little ray of sunshine. I shall call him—just to myself—my little ray!"

And so, once or twice, she did call him, until she fell peacefully asleep and remained deep in slumber through all her mother's nocturnal visitings.

CHAPTER XX: BECKWITH IN THE DOCK

i

MRS. VECHANTOR came the next day with a very grave face; but her greeting was kind and her bearing throughout her stay was beautifully considerate. Dorothy was up again, and sat in a comfortable chair beside the fire, reading the "Pickwick Papers" and eating apples. She was still reading the "Pickwick Papers," but was no longer eating apples, when Louis came in the evening. She had listened, it seemed to her, for hours, waiting for his ring at the door bell; and when he came he had entered by way of the shop, so that the first notice she had of his arrival was the opening of the sitting-room door.

Dorothy did not colour: she just felt her heart beating louder, and was afraid he might notice it. She looked straight across the room at him, so eager was she to see if he looked well or ill. That was why her greeting was a little cold; and yet, having been accidentally cold, she found it impossible to change her manner. It was as though a constraint, begun by chance, had seized upon her. Timidly she strove to escape from it—in vain. She could hardly speak.

Louis came and sat down in a chair opposite to Dorothy's, and smiled at her. She saw his finely poised head as of old, but his face was thinner, and when the fire started into flame she could tell that he was unhappy. He was unhappy, too. . . . Yes, but he would soon be happy. How well she knew that! How it

added to her unhappiness! The weight was again upon her heart. They sat looking at each other for a moment, two rather huddled figures in the warm room.

"I can see you're ever so much better," Louis said at last. "You're not the same."

"I'm very well," she told him. "I'm only being lazy. But I wish you were quite well."

Her eyes seemed to pore upon his face. A strange little shock ran through her. It was a faint incredulous joy. Was it really—could it be true that the one thing which Dorothy had regarded as a blemish had disappeared? It *was* true! Even in that moment, when she was, in spite of the "Pickwick Papers" and the presence of Louis, so far from being cheerful, Dorothy could not resist the consciousness of a small satisfaction. The little moustache which Louis had worn, and which she disliked, had disappeared. He was now clean-shaven, and the fine lines of his mouth were no longer impaired. It was to her the symbol of a subtle change in him.

"I've got a great deal to tell you," Louis mentioned. "And I want to hear quite a lot from you. I went across the common, as you told me to last night; and my mother was speaking awfully nicely about you. I'm so glad of that. It's quite cheered me up to know that you and she have become friends. I always knew you'd like each other, you know. I didn't see my father; but I went in to see him at the office to-day, and we've had a long talk. That's all quite settled, and we've got over our quarrel. We've both apologised—very funnily, like two dogs, or two gruff old clubmen. I'm going on to Apple House again when I leave here. I'm going to stay there."

"To be in Beckwith?" Dorothy did not know whether it was joy or fear that made her heart beat so fiercely.

"Yes. So I shall often see you. And you must come and see us."

Dorothy shook her head.

"Oh no; you won't want me," she said quietly, with a nervous movement of her hand. Louis frowned. She knew that, without looking at him. Why had he frowned?

"What nonsense!" he said. "You're all coming. We'll have a new order immediately. We shall come here, and you'll come to Apple House. And Beckwith will gibber. And the business will go up like a rocket. . . ."

"Rather like that, I'm afraid," Dorothy could not help saying dryly. "It can't go much farther down, as far as I can see."

"I think things are going to be rather jolly," Louis said, in a cheerful way.

"I wish they were," thought Dorothy soberly.

ii

However, in spite of the depression which she could not altogether shake off, they went on talking very comfortably. Louis described how he had left his father's office with the intention of never returning; and how, after leaving the flat near Finsbury Square two days later, he went to Camden Town, fell suddenly ill, was taken to a nursing home, and there tended until he slowly got better. He told how, on the night of the concert, he had travelled down to Beckwith, had called at the shop, and had followed to the Church Rooms. Then, how, after Dorothy's appearance in the second part of the programme, he had resolved to catch a train due a few minutes later and had hurried from the hall. That train, Dorothy guessed, must have been far out of sight by the time she reached the station No wonder she had not caught him up.

She listened to the story with her eyes nearly closed, loving the sound of his voice and the little pictures he gave of the things that had happened to him; but all the while filled with a melancholy because she could see no happy ending to all her thoughts. "It's no good. It's no good," she kept saying to herself, thinking of the future. And when he spoke of the concert she felt a stab of pain as she recalled the details of the evening—not as separate events, but as one miserable clot of distress.

"And now," Louis concluded; "what about you? How did you get into this state?"

iii

"Louis," said Dorothy suddenly. "I wish you hadn't to go back to your father's business."

It was so unexpected, that Louis started. He thought for an instant before answering.

"Well . . . I wish I hadn't, too; but there's no getting out of it. I can't give it up now. What did you mean, though? Nothing about my father, of course."

"Oh no; though I think he was cruel. I wish you could do something yourself. I mean, to step right outside money-making. I'm very vague about it; but . . . something . . . Dad laughs at me when I say that word; but I don't know any other—something 'real.' D'you know, I don't think anybody in Beckwith is doing anything real—anything to make the world better or happier. I always get stupid, I know. . . ."

Louis sighed, looking at the animation of her face, so different from its earlier expression of a rather pinched misery.

"I'm such an awful failure," he said. "I've been thinking . . . You must excuse me, Dorothy; but if I

start talking about this there'll be no stopping me. Everything I try to do myself simply goes wrong."

"It doesn't. It may *seem* to for a time!" cried Dorothy stoutly.

"Perhaps that's it," agreed Louis. "I wish I'd been able to talk to you a month ago."

"You might have." It was only a murmur; but he caught it.

"I know I might. But somehow . . . when you want anybody to like you, you can't go to them and tell all your rotten little miseries."

Dorothy drew a quick breath. A faint colour came into her cheeks.

"I should have been so proud," she said quickly.

For two or three minutes they did not again speak. Dorothy had been given a tiny spark of happiness by his candour, and she was thrilling with it. Louis remained still, looking at the fire, and thinking of Daunton and Veronica and the shop. Presently he sighed again.

"What was it you wanted me to take up? The real thing, I mean," he proceeded.

"No. That's where I'm vague. I hadn't thought of anything. Only ever since we came to Beckwith I've been looking at all the men getting fatter and the women getting uglier, and the children getting more like their fathers and mothers; and I've felt like screaming, and saying: 'For goodness' sake, stop it! What's the good of repeating yourselves all over and over again, and making more men who grow fatter and women who grow uglier, and children who grow up like their mothers and fathers?' I've felt like Alice at the trial, when she says they're all only cards. But nothing happened—to change them. Don't you see? It's so horrible to see them going on and on—endlessly, like . . . like I don't know what. That's what I've thought. Of course, your

father hasn't got fat. I didn't mean he had. Or that you'll get fat. I don't think you'll ever get that."

"Oh, the two diseases in Beckwith are fatty degeneration and desiccation," Louis said. "I shall get desiccated. I've felt that I was going downhill. You see, I've never had to worry about money. I've never *had* to be ambitious. If you go to Oxford with money you just get through your days very happily, and all you do there unfits you for taking any work very seriously. That is, unless you're naturally a worker. I'm not. I never did anything much at Oxford, and I've never done anything much in Beckwith." He thought a moment. "I suppose you might say I've never tried to improve Beckwith?"

"You couldn't," Dorothy said, in a clear voice. "Nobody could."

iv

"I wonder," objected Louis thoughtfully.

"Only a revolution could," Dorothy added. "A sudden upheaval. It might make them think. Oh, but nothing could make them think. They've got nothing to think with. It isn't a question of brains alone. It's imagination they want. They can't put themselves in other people's shoes."

"Can you, in theirs?" Louis wondered still.

Dorothy thought for a moment. Had she ever tried to do that? Perhaps not: she had been eager in readiness to be at one with them; but in finding that they did not share her wish for friendship she had shrunk into a state of hostility. She had unsparingly criticised them for stubborn refusal to meet her on level terms.

"I should have thought so," she claimed at last. "At least, I've tried to understand what makes them so stupid.

I can only think it's natural to them to be stupid. Are you defending them?"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Louis, startled afresh by her question. "I couldn't. I've become as hostile to them as you could possibly be. No, I think they're indefensible."

"You see, when we came here they never tried to wonder if we'd come innocently. They saw us as enemies from the beginning. It was they who began the trouble. We didn't. We only wanted to carry on the business—Dad wanted. Directly we found out about you, we shivered and wanted to go away again; but it was too late. They never asked what our feelings were. They were beastly from the start. Oh, Louis; you don't know what it's been to go out into this beautiful country and always to meet frowns or sniffs, and to have the girls turning away—as if I should hurt them. When I only wanted to be nice to everybody."

Unconsciously Dorothy had become pathetic, a forlorn figure by the fireside, with the flames leaping upon her dress and her pale face. She looked even younger than she was—a child who has been grievously disappointed. Louis hastened to reassure her as to his own feeling.

"Don't think I haven't hated it," he said hurriedly. "Why, that was one of the chief things that drove me away." He laughed slightly, without enjoyment. "It's been one of my chief horrors that I *didn't* stay and stand by you. If I'd done that I shouldn't feel such a weakling. I just left you in the lurch."

"It wasn't that that drove you away."

"It was the beginning. Did I ever tell you about the first trouble with father?" He described the scene at the dinner-table. "You couldn't understand how I felt," he concluded. "Absolutely hopeless."

"I could," Dorothy said, very low, her eyes flashing.

"I don't see how you could ever feel *hopeless*," Louis protested. "You're so confident."

"I?" Dorothy was astounded. "Why, Louis . . . How . . . Isn't it funny how people get wrong ideas about others! You think you're weak; and I don't think so at all. You think I'm confident . . . I think it's only because I was so rude to you at first. When I think about myself I wonder why I'm alive—what use I am to anybody. I seem just to go on from day to day . . . never to do anything worth while at all. If anybody ever felt hopeless it's I. Sometimes I'm in despair."

Both were very moved at such a mutual disclosure. It made both of them very thoughtful for several minutes. At last Louis said, with a quick nod that showed he had understood her:

"This isn't much like our first talk, is it? We've both grown a little since then."

They might have gone on endlessly. Nevertheless, the disclosures had been made. They saw each other more truly, which had been a necessity to them. He did not want to go; but it was nine o'clock, and he had to see his father; so their conversation was ended a few minutes later. Louis held Dorothy's hand for a moment in parting.

"I'll think about what you've said," he went on. "Although I stay at the office there's no reason at all why I shouldn't pull myself together and live a rather wider life. I'm afraid I've got the Beckwith habit of mind. I've lived here too long. It's a sort of parochialism. But you'll help me get over it, won't you?"

"I do wish I wasn't so young!" cried Dorothy impulsively. "It's such a hindrance."

"And so pretty?" he asked, with a pleasant look.

Did he think her pretty, then? Dorothy's heart gave a bound.

"I wish I was as beautiful as the stars," she said. "If that would be any use."

v

When he had gone, Dorothy went back to the fire, and Louis's words still rang in her ears. He thinks I'm pretty! she thought. It was extraordinarily comforting. It started a wild hope in her mind. He thought her pretty. Perhaps he didn't think Veronica was pretty? Oh, but she was! Dorothy shook her head. There could be no doubt which of them was the prettier. And did her prettiness count for anything? She tried hard to read any sort of feeling other than kindness in his manner.

"Oh no, my dear," she said at last, addressing herself, and her spirits sinking; "you may be pretty; but it's Veronica who . . ." A long vagueness beset her, in which reveries drifted kaleidoscopically. Again she shook her head. "He likes me as a friend. He can talk to me. Well, I can talk to him. I feel extraordinarily as though we had ever so much that's the same in us. Perhaps too much. But he isn't in love with me. Why should he be? Anyway, I'd rather be his friend than nothing. I think . . . I think I'd rather be his friend than be Veronica Hughes. I'm sure I'd rather not be her. Not at any price. Not for the sake of marrying him. Not even for that. No . . . Perhaps it's only sour grapes. . . . Oh, but I don't think it is. . . ."

Even as she said that her heart froze; because nothing on earth could make her disbelieve altogether in miracles. She was quite too young to have reached the point of disbelieving in miracles where love is concerned. It would have been too much to ask of her.

CHAPTER XXI: BECKWITH ON THE BENCH

i

DOROTHY'S sleep that night was sweet and long; and when she saw in the morning how the February sun had flooded her room with warm light her heart was rejoiced. She parted the curtains and looked out of the window. Their garden ran down to another garden; but beyond that was a field in which on Saturdays boys played football, and beyond that again were trees that hid other, larger, gardens. The trees she saw were fruit trees, for Beckwith was a great fruit-growing district and every garden was an orchard. In a few weeks the lovely white cherry blossom would transform this view into a fairy vista, and later there would be the faintly-coloured blossom of apple and pear. All the scents and sounds of the happy seasons would come gradually into being, and birds would chirrup and bees would hum. She would awaken to the noises of Spring and Summer; her heart would feel as though it were bursting with joy. If she tried, she could imagine the long beautiful evenings, with the sun sinking and light breezes making the leaves whisper, and she could feel upon her face the scented air, heavy and sweet. Even now Dorothy could distinguish a new freshness that was carried in at her open window—a freshness that softened her heart and made her stand upright with a passionate outreaching to beauty. It would be so exquisite . . . if only she were happy. She knew that to sit in the garden

at Apple House, while the birds chattered and the roses hung sleepily in the sunshine, must be to endure a perfect sensation. It was peace that she so desired, the power to rest for a moment in such content, as innocent of plan or fear as a hovering butterfly. And whenever she had passed Apple House it had been with the sense that here was the true abode of peace. To be able to go there, gently walking in the garden, hearing and seeing the delights of such an arbour, was to Dorothy a dream, something sweeter than she had ever known.

In a reverie, she stood looking out of the window, until the duties of the moment called her to help her mother. The day was begun. But for the outer world, which had yet so incongruous a call to her active spirit, Dorothy could have dreamed her way through the hours. That thoughtfulness which had been brought by her love for Louis endured from day to day, and she was less impatient than she had been of inaction. But it did not destroy her sense of immediate facts, and her help was not less competent than it had been. She it was who swept the room and laid the table, while her mother prepared the meal. It was Dorothy who saw that nothing was omitted, that her father had his newspaper ready to hand, and her mother the particular knife with the frizzled handle which she had used each morning for fifteen years. No detail was lost; all was arranged methodically and well. Dorothy had a clear head. So, when William came into the room, rather short and broad, his fresh face shining and clear, he knew at once that his girl was better and in what he called good fighting trim. So, when Reg. came tumbling down the stairs, rather late, there was the satisfactory feeling all through this cheerful family that things were as usual.

"I don't know what we should do without our little Doll," cried William, rubbing his hands. "Now, where

do we stand?" He proceeded to serve the bacon and eggs. Only his two womenfolk knew that he was depressed. At that moment William was cheerful; for he had thrown off his worry in the pleasure at the family reunion. But the sight of the bacon had reminded him of business, and the sight of his face had made Dorothy remember that her own trouble, although the most poignant to her, was not the only anxious thing that had to be endured at this juncture.

ii

And all the time, whether they were talking or not, Dorothy did not care what happened about the shop. Shops or houses, houses or shops—what had they to do with essential things? Why was it they became so unimportant when one was in love? She knew they could not be ignored, that love must fade, and its bloom vanish, if all sorts of things that went to make up the details of life were not planned and foreseen; but without love what did they matter? Nothing at all. One lived, one existed; but life had no significance. It was because life had no significance to them that the Beckwith people roused her scorn. They had no reason to go on being alive, for their hearts were dead. While she, so full of love, and even so full of fear, had her profound secret, the spring that moves character, the hidden power that makes for righteousness.

She thought of what Louis had said. How patient he had been with her! He had seen her ideal, but not her love. She recalled his words, wondering over them as if they had been treasures. But none of them had been words of love—only of friendship and confidence in her, as though he felt that she could be trusted. He had said, to explain why he had not told her earlier of his

discouragements, that he had wanted her to like him. That was sweet to Dorothy. But only to like—not to love. Secretly, she thought with joy of his face, of his gestures. Supposing he were rather in love with Veronica—excitedly pleased with her prettiness and her wish to please him. Supposing he really turned to Dorothy, as to one who could best understand him. . . . Shrewdly and bitterly she shook her head. Men did not fall in love with girls whom they thought wise and sympathetic. The things that made them fall in love were quite different. Coquetry, which flattered them; mysteriousness, that attracted their curiosity . . . Those were what mattered. Dorothy had no coquetry, and no mysteriousness. She shook her head again, sighing; and Mrs. William pondered as she refilled William's cup, for she had seen these two shakings of the head, and she was deeply concerned with the thoughts that gave rise to them.

iii

Housework and the preparation of the midday meal kept Dorothy busy during the morning. It was not until after the meal that she was free to go out-of-doors. The sun was then so bright, and the white clouds from the north-west were travelling so quickly, dappling the earth with their flying shadows, that the day was exquisite. Noises echoed in the Spring-like air, and the voices from the playing field rolled o-o-oh like incredulous cries in billows of small sound. When Dorothy went out she heard everything distinctly, and held her head high because the wind was so boisterous. All the upper branches of the trees were swaying. Quick fingers of bright sunshine chased each other across the common, starting long patches of grass into glistening emerald and

by contrast darkening the other parts of the green. There was a sound in the air as of rushing water. Dorothy's heart seemed as though it had expanded, it felt so soft, and ready to be easily moved. The roofs of the houses besides the common shone. When one was in the sun its warmth was perceptible. It was a beautiful day, keen and fine, a day for long walks and for happiness, brilliant and open.

Already the people of Beckwith were coming out of their houses. Doors were slamming in the sudden gusts of wind. The girls wore brighter clothes, and looked up at the clouds as if they were all filled with the same enthusiasm as Dorothy. She felt exalted. It was Saturday, and there was a stir of activity in the town. Carts dashed out beside the green and pulled up in front of the houses. Boys with footballs were coming in little groups, making their way from the town to the neighbouring fields where they were going to pick up sides and rush about in their shirt sleeves or their football jerseys, shouting and happy. If it had not been for Veronica and Miss Lampe Dorothy would have felt loving to all the world.

It was while she was walking thus beside the common, hugging the treasure of her delight in all this sense of growth and happy activity, that Dorothy saw approaching her from the opposite direction the figure of Mr. Toppett. Instantly she was aware of a slight shrinking, for she remembered the scene in the dressing-room and that this was her first time out-of-doors since that dreadful evening. She tried hard not to let her shrinking be seen, although for an instant it paralysed her, and walked on with her eyes bright and her cheeks a little flushed. Mr. Toppett had his eldest child, a boy of four, who was forced to wear large round black-rimmed spectacles, walking beside him. It would have been so easy to stop

and make a little laughing introduction. It would have meant nothing, but it would have shown charity and kindness. The little boy was tightly holding Mr. Toppett's hand in his hot fist, and was dragging and wandering about the path in his puppy-like curiosity at all he saw. Dorothy shrank again. Mr. Toppett came nearer. As he approached she heard him say to his little boy in an irritated voice, "Come on, come on. . . . You *must* look where you're going." But he kept his eyes low, pretending to be engrossed with the stumbling boy. His broad ugly face was severe: he deliberately avoided taking any notice of Dorothy.

iv

With her head up, and her cheeks sparkling, Dorothy walked on. A strange little coldness stood in her breast, like a fear, and her lips trembled into a smile of wounded pride; but she kept upon her way. She was saying to herself: "I see . . . I see . . ." and pretending that she didn't mind. But she was bitterly hurt. It was significant. She perfectly understood that she had been outrageous and was to be punished She had been too honest, and Beckwith was going to punish her.

Perhaps Dorothy's first impulse had been to go to Apple House, but after this encounter that had become impossible. She could not force herself upon Mrs. Vechantor, who had been so kind, if she were once again really in disgrace. Mrs. Vechantor would be embarrassed. She was bound to wish to withdraw. After all, she had only been kind to a girl who was in the extremity of distress.

"Oh, I'm no good," Dorothy thought, with a horrible dismay. "I'm always wrong. I can't do right. There's

something outrageous about me. I don't fit . . . I'm no good."

She was in a sort of wounded despair. Some impulse made her turn away from Apple House. She felt it was forbidden to her. Instead, she turned down another road, the road that led to the railway station. She would go round by that way, and home again by the road in which she and her father had met Louis that Sunday. For a moment Dorothy did not realise that the way she had impulsively chosen would take her past Miss Lampe's house. Had she thought, she would have known this and would have fled by any other road. As it was, she went blindly on, her heart still beating with indignation and chagrin, until she was almost abreast of the ugly little house, and did not see that Miss Lampe was in the act of slamming her front door. Nor did Miss Lampe see Dorothy until they were quite close, and she was stepping down backwards from her doorstep. The sound of a step made Miss Lampe look over her shoulder. The shock of seeing Dorothy confused her for a moment. Her ankle turned; her foot slipped from the step into the greasy mud of the footpath, and Miss Lampe sat down abruptly in front of her own house, in a shallow puddle of undrained water.

V

"Oh!" they both said, uncontrollably, with different inflections. Miss Lampe grew violently red, and Dorothy stopped dead in front of her. Then Dorothy ran forward, holding out her hands to assist the fallen woman who sat so uncomfortably before her. But Miss Lampe waved her off.

"No!" she cried, in a sort of frenzy; and scrambled to her feet, turning a muddy back upon Dorothy. She was in a terrible state of excitement, trembling and talking

to herself. She could not wait to use her door-key, but hammered violently at the door, so that her old and deaf servant should admit her. She clung to the door-knob. "Go away! Go away!" she cried to Dorothy, turning over her shoulder a face distorted with all sorts of emotions. "I won't have you touch me."

Miss Lampe could never have realised the grotesque effect of her muddied black poplin dress, creased and dirty, her wrinkled face, turned a carroty-red by her excitement, her ugly bonnet thrown askew by the fall. She was too filled with frantic distaste for Dorothy to think of anything at all, and continued to hammer at her front door with the fierceness of one demented.

"I'm so awfully sorry," Dorothy said subduedly.

"Go away. You *bad* girl!" cried Miss Lampe. "You *bad* girl!" She strained her head away.

Dorothy stood helplessly for a moment. Then, with a shrug which she could not help, she walked on. Long after she had gone she heard the knocker still at work, but she did not turn round. She felt shocked and irritated at this extraordinary scene; both hurt and miserable. But when she had walked a little farther, and was quite out of sight of the house, she was shaken by a fit of nervous and almost hysterical laughter at the unexpected sight of Miss Lampe sitting in the muddy pathway and Miss Lampe clinging to her own front door, with thin streams of mud trickling piteously down her poplin skirt. It was the height of the grotesque, because Miss Lampe would rather have died than appear before Dorothy in any plight so ridiculous.

vi

That was not the last of Dorothy's encounters, for when one goes out-of-doors in Beckwith it is impossible

to avoid meeting one quarter of the residents in the town. She had turned up an unfrequented road, that was sacred upon summer evenings to those amorous couples who love strolling under over-arching trees or sitting upon mossy banks among the great straying roots of trees, which lie above the surface of the ground like great veins. Upon such evenings one could see the white tufts of scampering rabbits like feathers in the dusk. The ground hereabouts was full of rabbit-holes, into which inquisitive dogs dived whining and scratching as they were taken along the road. Now, however, the earth was still bare. The undergrowth was just sparking into faint bud, the moss was greening, the tiny fallen branches from the previous year still cracked under the feet. Only above the trees interlaced, and their skeleton boughs rattled in the wind.

It was a lonely road, and when the clouds obscured the sun it was dark. A piece of glass sparkled once by the roadside, and something—it may have been a rat, or a mouse, or a little bird—made a slight noise among some dead and sodden leaves as Dorothy passed. Otherwise everything was still. Dorothy, recovered from her fit of laughter, had tears in her eyes; her lips trembled again at the feeling of desolateness. She became suddenly oppressed with a sense of the road's gloom, frightened of being alone. It made her hurry, to escape the dread, the haunting unfathomable dread, that was upon her. The trees were full of a thousand eyes, watching her distress, and mocking her. For two or three steps she ran; but when her nerves were again under control she tried to reassure herself.

"It's nothing," she whispered. "I'm not well. I'm a coward. Oh, but how *awful* it is to be alone! I'm frightened of being alone. If I were much alone I think I should go mad. People do, you know. When they're

imprisoned, or . . . sent to Coventry. That's what I am. And what have I done that's wicked? Nothing. I've done nothing wicked. It was Miss Lampe who was wicked. . . ." She puzzled over it for a long time. It all seemed so wrong to her. Yes, but Miss Lampe had fallen in the mud. She wouldn't have fallen in the mud if she hadn't had a bad conscience. "She's got a bad conscience," Dorothy assured herself. "I haven't. That's because I'm wicked. But I'm not wicked. I've never been wicked. She's got a bad conscience, and it made her fall in the mud. I can't help feeling rather glad. . . . No, I'm not glad. How glad she'd have been if it had been I who fell in the mud! She'd have thought it a punishment. . . . Perhaps she'll say I did! Perhaps she'll say I pushed her! Oh, how horrible to be as wicked as Miss Lampe! Good, I mean. . . . Of course, I mean *good!*"

She had been thinking so much about Miss Lampe and her fall in the mud that she did not notice Veronica Hughes in the distance; but Veronica had seen her and had turned hastily, walking quickly in the other direction. Something in that abrupt turn drew Dorothy's attention to the figure of Veronica. Her heart gave a jerk. It was Veronica. Something made Dorothy begin to walk more quickly. She did not gain upon Veronica. She began to run, and so began to overtake her. As if Veronica heard the steps behind she too increased her pace. It almost seemed as if she too began to run; but it was only that she walked with flying steps. Dorothy, heated and excited by the run, lost heart suddenly, and stopped about a dozen yards behind, panting. Veronica, unable to resist the bidding of her curiosity, looked fearfully over her shoulder.

"Miss Hughes," cried Dorothy.

Veronica walked on. Dorothy repeated her cry. For

a moment Veronica wavered. Then she turned, only half-stopping.

"I don't want to speak to you," she said, in a breathless, choking voice.

"Oh, but . . . please tell me. . . . Do *you* think I'm wicked for . . . being rude to Miss Lampe?" called Dorothy.

Veronica made no reply, but walked quickly on. Dorothy shrugged her shoulders, very red, and dropped back. She had deliberately courted this discomfiture, and she had been rewarded. What an idiot she had been! To lay herself open to the snub. To invite it!

When Veronica was quite a long distance away she again turned round. At first she could not speak; but at last, with a great effort, she gained strength to call out in a trembling voice.

"I think you're abominable!" she cried shrilly; and resumed her headlong flight.

vii

Dorothy was quite taken aback at such a word. It was such an odd word; and yet there could be no mistaking either the word or the venom with which it had been uttered. Why should Veronica hate her? People would say, because Dorothy knew Veronica's secret; but that was cynical absurdity. It was not true. Why should Veronica hate her, and not Miss Lampe and the others who had been there? It frightened her. When she thought of her three meetings, her three horrible meetings, she was overcome with terror. What did it mean? What had she done? What did they think she had done?

It was all very mysterious, and Dorothy drew her breath sobbingly as she stumbled after Veronica. The

day had lost all its sweetness for her. She no longer noticed the moving freshness of the opening Spring. The sky had become overcast. No birds sang. All was dark and melancholy. She was alone in that dreary road, but in life she was still more completely alone. She did not dare to think of seeing Mrs. Vechantor. The new promising acquaintance with Mrs. Toppett was at an end. Veronica, whom she so despised and pitied and feared, thought her abominable. Miss Lampe was now her declared enemy. Mr. Toppett ignored her—Mr. Toppett, who should have been the last, by his own faith, to be lacking in charity. Of all others he should have been the one to try to be kind to her. Instead, he was the first to pass her with averted face. That was his charity. Well for the world that all clergymen, all teachers of mankind, were not as he! Mr. Toppett, as barometric as anybody in Beckwith!

And Louis was lost to her. Sooner or later, now, he would hear all about her. That frank talk was the last they would have together. When he learned that she had run through the rain, like a mad creature, forgetful of all the dignity with which a girl must hide her feelings from all human creatures, he would hate her. He, too, if Veronica thought that, would find her abominable! It was too much! Dorothy paused in the deserted road, wiping her eyes, her mouth drooping at the corners, worn out with the weight of reproach which she was having to carry.

She had hardly the courage to find her way back into the town. She passed Apple House with her head down, in case anybody there should see her. Deliberately, she skirted the common by the less freely used road, hoping thus to avoid further unkindness. Not wholly was she successful. Two or three people, seeing her, looked another way, and afterwards watched her with inquisitive,

critical eyes. She made no attempt to obtain their recognition. She felt as though she was finally, without appeal, yet for what sin she did not yet know, an outcast.

Even when Dorothy reached the High Street, and was about to enter the shop, she had not ended that afternoon's ordeal, for she saw in the distance Mr. and Mrs. Toppett and their little boy, all walking hand in hand. She saw Mrs. Toppett falter, look at her husband, and flush deeply. It was with a new kind of pain that Dorothy recognised Mrs. Toppett's kind impulse. She turned away, but not before she had caught and acknowledged the little bow that Mrs. Toppett, in defiance of all Beckwith, had given in her direction. It made her heart swell. But it made her go straight to her bedroom and there relieve in a burst of passionate weeping the burden of her over-charged heart. It was the one piece of kindness shown her in the whole of that beautiful afternoon, when all nature was radiant and only the occupants of houses in Beckwith were showing still the chill effects of winter.

CHAPTER XXII: SUNDAY MORNING

i

THE next day was Sunday, another lovely day with the wind from the north-west and high white clouds swimming across the sky as if they had been swans upon an illimitable lake. Dorothy was up early, although she was weary; and the breakfast was cleared away and the housework half-done before the first church bells began to ring. There was a sweet chime from Mr. Toppett's church, and a dull "hell-hell-hell" from the Congregational church, and a sharper, but equally monotonous outcry from the Baptist chapel. Somewhere in the town there was also a braying Salvationist band. All these loud noises combined with the general stillness to remind everybody in Beckwith that this was Sunday. The High Street was filled with people smartly dressed and sedate, who carried prayer books and made a regular hushing sound of feet in unison. Dorothy looked out from the window in Reg.'s room, and sighed to see everybody apparently so contented, while she alone was heartsore.

Her mother and father had joined the throng. She and Reg. remained in the house. She was going to cook the dinner, and must presently hurry downstairs to mix the ingredients for her pudding. Already the currants were soaking in a big basin; and she was going to roll them in a cloth, and pick away the stalks. Hey! she thought. I mustn't stand idling here! It'll never do! So she began to hurry, and Reg.'s room was quickly

finished. He was already downstairs, boiling a kettle in order to obtain steam for one of his models.

When everybody was in church, and when Dorothy, with spotless sleeves rolled above her pretty elbows, had stalked her currants and was mixing the pudding, Reg. was at work, whistling and laughing, with all the inventor's pride in a practicable device. He called down from his room: "Doll! Dollee! Done it!"

"Hoo, good!" cried Dorothy, and continued mixing her pudding. To herself she added: "I'm so glad!" Reflectively, as she continued thinking about the model, and about her abstracted kettle, she thought: "He'll be in a good temper all day. What a blessing! It'll be quite like home!"

It was at that moment, when her arms were all floury, that a ring came at the door. She thought it must be the milkman, and so she took his bottle and a big jug, and presented Louis, who stood without, with a new picture of his cousin.

"Hullo, Dorothy!" he said, refusing the bottle and the jug with a careless gesture.

So he had come. Well, why had he come? Dorothy wondered. She looked frankly at him in surprise, and with her apron wiped flour off the door-catch. Mutely she admitted him, and they went together into the kitchen behind the shop.

ii

"And now," said Louis. . . . "What I've really come for is to ask whether you would all care to come over to Apple House to tea. I've brought a letter from my mother to Mrs. William, and if she's not in you're to read it and tell me, if you can, whether you can come."

"But Louis!" cried Dorothy. She stood before him very floury, having stood the milkman's property upon

the table beside her basin. A pucker of doubt stood in her forehead. She did not attempt to take the offered note.

"Why not?" Louis was unshaken. "I ought to say that this is all my mother's own idea. It's not a command. It's just her first real attempt to be friendly. I've had nothing to do with it . . ."

"No. I can't come." Dorothy seemed to awaken from a dream.

"Angry?"

"No. Afraid." She met his question squarely. Louis waited. Mechanically, she began again to stir the flour and the currants together in her large pudding basin. He saw her head shaken.

"What, then? Afraid of my father?"

Again Dorothy's head was shaken. She did not see how she could go to Apple House when everybody in Beckwith was trying to show her that she was something vile.

"It seems," she said at last, as he waited so patiently, leaning against the table, with a slow smile crossing his face—a smile which was not at all amused, but only kind. "It seems that I've been doing something very wicked. I don't know what it is; but it's evidently wicked. And I'm so afraid that when your mother hears about it—of course, it's not true . . . whatever it is—she'll feel I've taken advantage of her kindness. Miss Lampe says I'm wicked. And Ver . . ." She stopped, afraid now to mention that name. Then, her honesty, and perhaps her jealousy, getting the upper hand, she concluded: "And Veronica Hughes thinks I'm abominable."

"Veronica!" A colour came into Louis's cheeks.

Dorothy stood there quiet silent, devouring that colour. It was as though she had stabbed herself, for her heart

raced. Every drop of blood seemed drained from her face. She felt stifled.

iii

"Do you know Veronica Hughes, then?" Louis asked, almost carelessly. "Oh, I suppose you must, as she was singing at the concert." He paused, looking down. "D'you like her?" he suddenly asked.

Dorothy, her lips tightly closed, breathed rapidly. Her hands were still again. With brooding eyes she watched his averted face, and when he sharply turned, waiting for her answer, she could not drop her lids in time to hide her doubt.

"Oh, you don't!" Louis said. His tone seemed to be sharp. Dorothy tried to smile.

"I think she's most awfully pretty," she said. "Nobody could help thinking that. But when a girl has called you abominable you'd hardly be expected to like her very much. Or think of her justly.

"Why did she call you abominable?" asked Louis, intently listening.

"I don't quite know. Because I asked if she thought I was wicked."

"I didn't know you were so self-conscious," laughed Louis. "Do you ask everybody that?"

"Not everybody," Dorothy said, with pain. "Never, anybody, until I came to Beckwith."

"And what put wickedness into your head at all? I mean, why did you ask her? It seems such a curious gambit."

Dorothy drew a quick, rather sobbing breath.

"Louis, I can't go on talking about it. I'm unhappy about it; because it's so recent. But, you see, I shouldn't like to come . . . and your mother to think I'm wicked . . ."

Louis put his hand upon her arm, above the elbow, not so that his fingers touched her skin. His expression was altogether kind and sympathetic.

"Don't be absurd," he said. "D'you suppose she cares two carrots what these people say about you? Why, where's your nerve, Dorothy? You're not losing it, are you? I've no doubt all the pussies in Beckwith have hurried to my mother; and I'm absolutely sure she means to stand by you. Besides, I'd trust your opinion of yourself before anybody's. I would, really. And, another thing: I don't think you could be particularly wicked. You don't somehow manage to convey an *impression* of wickedness. Of course," he was rather inclined to laugh, because he could not take seriously anything so absurd as this charge, "you're rather daring for Beckwith. Rather honest. What Beckwith calls 'rather fast.' And God bless you for it!"

He said these last words in a curious, sudden voice, and rose to his full height. Dorothy glowed a little, looking trustfully at him, and feeling grateful; but not yet convinced that her shocks of yesterday had been matter for laughter. Her heart was still too heavy for laughter.

The sound of Reg.'s galloping feet upon the upper stairs caused her to speak quickly.

"I don't know," she said. "About coming. . . . It would be so awful . . ."

Reg. burst into the room.

"It's working grand!" he cried. Then, seeing Louis, he pulled up. There was a perceptible change in his attitude to his cousin. "I say, could you both come up and look at it?" he begged. "I'm so afraid it'll go off the boil."

"My pudding!" gasped Dorothy.

They all made for the stairs, Reg. hastening on, with,

from his room, shouts of a reassuring and hortatory character.

iv

They stayed for only a minute. Then Dorothy was forced to hurry back to the kitchen, and Louis followed her as quickly as he dared. He stood by Reg.'s engine, admiring the cleverness which had given rise to it. Reg. discoursed for a few minutes; but was soon lost in experiment, talking to himself, as boy-inventors do. Accordingly Louis was able to slip away almost unobserved. He rejoined Dorothy.

"I must go now," he said. Impudently, he concluded: "I shall say you're coming. I shall say you insist on discussing your wickedness with my mother. Shall I?" Dorothy did not answer. "Or would you rather I used the word abominableness?"

"Oh, Louis!" she cried desperately. "Don't! Don't joke! I can't bear it!"

A kind of horror had come into her face. Her eyes were dilated. She was trembling.

"Dorothy!" he said quickly. "I never meant to hurt. I was trying to cheer you up. Do forgive me! I was a beast!"

"No. . . . But if you knew how it hurt!"

"*These* people?" he demanded incredulously. "Despise them! I though you *did*."

Dorothy, still breathing quickly, watched him.

"Despise Veronica Hughes?" she asked, in a smothered voice.

Louis fell silent for an instant. His face had become altogether grave.

"Well, shall we say . . . feel sorry for her . . ." he suggested. "Because she forgot her own sweetness in some fit of anger."

"Well, then," said Dorothy, with an air of spirit which had no echo in her heart, "I'll try and feel sorry for her. But I can't help feeling sorry for myself. I *was* sorry for her. I *am* sorry. But she needn't have been so cruel."

"Oh," said Louis. "People are, you know. Veronica's always been rather cruel. I think perhaps we're all rather cruel. . . . Don't you?"

"Yes," said Dorothy, in a sober voice. "Perhaps we are."

A few moments later, with her arms still floury, she went with him to the front door. His last words as he turned away were:

"I shall expect you!"

Dorothy, looking up at the clock, was filled with panic. That panic saved her from melancholy thoughts. It made her concentrate upon the dinner, and work is a good obstacle to oppose to painful reflection. This fact is well known in Beckwith, which is never tired of the old saw about Satan and idle hands. In his room at the top of the house Reg. was defying Satan, and at the top of his voice singing "Alexander's Rag-Time Band." In the kitchen Dorothy was shaking her head and gently lowering her pudding into a pot of water. She was shaking her head over Louis.

"He didn't let me see what he felt about her," she was thinking. "And like a silly jealous girl I tried to make him think badly of her. Eh dear, he knows now that I don't like her. One day she'll tell him the reason. Not the true reason; but near enough . . . for her. She'll be sure of him then." Dorothy continued to stand by the kitchen fire, hearing the muffled roar behind and beneath the iron enclosures. It came to her to think at this moment: "But she isn't sure of him now. She's

frightened." Suddenly her face became deadly pale, and her hands rose, clenched and trembling. She cried out in a loud voice: "It's something *she's* said about me. Something she's invented. Oh, why didn't I see it before! Of course, that's what it is!"

For several minutes Dorothy was in a state of extreme terror.

CHAPTER XXIII: SUNDAY AFTERNOON

i

MRS. VECHANTOR'S note was very short and very cordial. It said:

"Dear Mrs. William,—Do you think you would all care to come across the common this afternoon about four o'clock to have tea at Apple House? We should all be so glad if you could come. I want you to meet my husband; and now that Louis is at home again and we are all together it would be a nice way to bring our two families together and make all the members known to each other. I do hope you will come. It would be very generous of you.—Yours sincerely,

"Enid Vechantor."

"H'm," said Mrs. William interestedly. "Her name's Enid. . . . Can't say that it's a name I was ever very fond of. A pale name, I always thought it . . ." She looked critically at her husband. "Will dear, that tie's too bright to go out in again to-day . . ."

"Eh, eh, eh?" said William, trying to see over his chin. "Go out? What's the matter with my tie?"

"Rotten!" cried Reg. "Like a sunset."

"No, Reg. It's not like a sunset," objected his mother mildly. "It's too bright for going out to tea. It's very nice for going to church, of course. . . . But in a house it's different. You can't stand colours in a house like you can in church. At least, I can't; and I expect Mrs.

Vechantor's the same as me in that respect." She was very patient; but she was firm.

"Mum. . . . Don't let him wear a black tie," urged Dorothy.

William looked round with affected indignation.

"It's taken for granted," he said, "that I'm going out. I don't know that I am . . ."

"I think he'd do then," placidly remarked Mrs. William. "Don't you, dear?" She turned to Dorothy. "I must make sure he's got one of Reg.'s handkerchiefs."

"I say!" clamoured Reg. "I like that! He can't have one of mine. I'm using them all. I want them all myself."

It was explained to Reg. that his father had no creditable handkerchiefs; and at last Reg. nodded his head, giving consent to the use of a beautiful white handkerchief with Reg.'s name embroidered by Dorothy in the corner of it. All this time William had been rolling his eyes.

"Here, give me the letter," he demanded at last; and he read it attentively. Then he looked round at his family. "Well," he said, "I must say that I'm ashamed of my family. Ashamed of my family. Here was Reg. here saying he'd never so much as look over the gate of his cousins' house, and Doll saying they could *keep* their old family pride in the dustbin, where it belonged. . . . And Mum saying it was quite right to keep the two families distinct. . . . Yet the first whistle; and you're all after it, like cats after a herring. . . . I'm ashamed of my family."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. William. "I don't think you'd better have any more pudding, because you'l' want to go to sleep; and I don't expect your cousin would like that, in his own house. It's not as if you were at home. . . . Will dear, you're not listening . . ."

ii

At a quarter-to-four they were all ready to start. Mrs. William inspected them. Dorothy she passed, as to garments, without remark; Reg. and William had a more prolonged examination. She herself turned slowly round before them all, and each solemnly assured her that everything was well. Handkerchiefs were shown—even flourished; and the family descended the stairs like an Indian tribe, William leading the way. The High Street was quiet. Only a few loiterers—little boys, one with a mortar-board hat, and one with a tight little bowler, stood about, their boots brightly polished, and their faces shining. A girl came quickly along from the common, evidently a maidservant from one of the large houses. It was a bright afternoon, and the sun was warm in spite of the early season.

"All ready?" queried William; and then slammed the front door.

At that moment a figure came close to them; the figure of a tall thin man with a line down each cheek like the curly backward "S" in the face of a violin, and with rather long side-whiskers. The man was clearly a tradesman, though he was dressed in a frock-coat and tall hat. He hurried up to William, and coughed, and took off his hat to the ladies, coughing again behind his hand.

"Mr. Vechantor?" he asked, in a self-depreciating voice. "Pardon me, Mr. Vechantor; but could you . . . is it too much to ask you to give me a few moments of your valuable time? I wouldn't trouble you; but my business is urgent. A few minutes. . . . My name's Flisk—Herbert Flisk. You may have noticed my little shop in the Station Road . . . Flisk: Provision Dealer . . ."

"Oh, Mr. Flisk," said William, with a quick scrutiny. "Of course I know your name. Well, my dears, you'd better go on alone . . . I'll come on later, when I've seen what Mr. Flisk . . ."

"Very kind of you," said Mr. Flisk. "*Very* kind, I'm sure."

He took off his hat with a flourish, and disappeared into the doorway in company with William. The three others went slowly towards the common.

"I wonder what he wants," said Mrs. William, voicing the common thought. Dorothy added, in a moment:

"He's been getting all Dad's trade, I think . . ."

All were busy in thought with this unexpected incident as they crossed the common. Dorothy had no eyes for anybody they passed; and so she did not notice that Veronica Hughes saw them all go into the gate of Apple House.

iii

Like any other visitors, they were ushered into the drawing-room by Rosemary, whose whole face beamed with the delighted surprise of one offered a tit-bit of information. Rosemary, in fact, almost (but, fortunately for her reputation as the finest parlourmaid in Beckwith, she did not quite fail in the requisite composure) slammed the door of the room in her eager haste to rush away and impart the news to her fellow-servants. From those servants to other servants, from servant to mistress, from mistress to mistress, the advent of the William Vechantors would spread like gorse-fire on the morrow.

Meanwhile the new-comers were welcomed. Emanuel Vechantor, very uncomfortable, but sustained by his pride, grasped their hands in turn. He allowed his wife

to receive Mrs. William, while Louis carried Reg. off to look at a system of home-made incandescent light which had its place in what had once been stables at the back of the house. Emanuel accepted Dorothy as an old friend. He was at first stately; but presently he warmed, talking to her, thawing at her pretty voice and her good behaviour. She was very timid with him until, when she could raise her eyes, she found that he also was shy; and from that moment they were good friends. She had been terrified at the thought that he would remember her first bedraggled appearance in that room. To her, for this reason, the visit had more terrors than to any of the others. But the terror passed. She found herself surprisedly talking to Emanuel about ancient Rome. She knew nothing of ancient Rome: she was almost as ignorant of it as any girl could have been: yet, being ignorant, she talked about it to Emanuel. That is to say, she found herself asking him questions, and intelligently receiving answers to her questions. When tea was brought in she felt a slight pressure upon her arm as Emanuel drew her attention to an arm-chair nearer to the table. . . . It gave her an electrical thrill. She scanned his face in doubt, reading there only kindness and liking. She felt so extraordinarily grateful that her heart softened. She forgave him for quarrelling with Louis. She even wondered how it was that two such men should ever have quarrelled. As if by instinct she looked across the room to Louis, as if to say "Isn't it wonderful!" and found him looking back with a pride that was still further moving and wonderful.

Then Rosemary threw open the door again, this time with pride, but with none of the amazed flourish that she had used in announcing the first comers.

"Mr. and Mrs. Toppett," she said.

Dorothy felt her heart go cold.

iv

How terrible that he should come! She saw Mrs. Vechantor flush slightly, and wondered if this visit had been expected. What did Louis think? His face was inscrutable. Standing up to receive the visitors he looked, she thought, more handsome than ever. With secret delight she observed his grace, his beautiful easy gestures. Nothing could have made her feel more proud. The Toppetts came into the room. They seemed to be brought up sharply at the sight of those present, and a quick eager expression of pleasure lighted up Mrs. Toppett's face. She turned to Mrs. William as soon as she had greeted her hostess, and then smiled and nodded to Dorothy.

It was Mr. Vechantor who took in hand the mention of Dorothy.

"I think you know my young cousin, Toppett . . ." he said.

Dorothy, with beating heart, saw Mr. Toppett bow to herself. He came nearer for an instant. His ugly face was expressionless. Dorothy thought he might have been thinking anything of her. He might have thought her wicked . . . She looked quickly to Louis, for support, for protection. He came forward at once, and she stood with Louis upon one side and Mr. Vechantor upon the other—solid enough support in Beckwith for any girl, however her good name had been questioned. She thrilled at the sense of safety. Ah, she was safe now with her cousins beside her! Even Mr. Toppett must understand that!

It appeared that he did. He spoke courteously to her, as he had never spoken before. That he was puzzled she could not doubt. That he was confused she thought

likely. But at last she was spoken to as a real girl, and not as a person to be endured. Mr. Toppett withdrew. He went to talk to Mrs. Vechantor. It was all so quiet, so pleasant; and the conversation of Louis and Mr. Vechantor was so gentle and humane that she was absorbed; but some clairvoyance made Dorothy realise deep in her heart that Mrs. Vechantor was talking to Mr. Toppett about her. She knew it as well as she would have done if they had constantly looked in her direction. They were talking of her. And Mrs. Vechantor was her friend. *She* did not think her wicked!

Such cordiality was balm to Dorothy. She was almost happy, for the first time for weeks. It was a significant afternoon. She understood then that Mrs. Vechantor had been truly her friend, and that she was enlisting Mr. Toppett as her cousin's champion at every tea-table in Beckwith. Mrs. Vechantor not only thought Dorothy not wicked; but she had taken this means as one of several. . . . Dorothy's defence had been put in train. Dorothy's heart swelled. Miss Lampe and Veronica might say what they pleased. Their spiteful tongues would be unavailing. Very well. Dorothy could forgive everything. She could even begin to forgive Veronica. Not wholly could she do that; but even a beginning had been impossible that morning.

It was a bright and cheerful tea-party. And when the Toppetts were going, and Mrs. Toppett, holding Dorothy's hand, had bent, upon sudden impulse, and kissed her, Dorothy looked steadfastly at Mrs. Toppett's husband. He, too, was warm.

"Miss Vechantor," he said, in his harsh and resonant voice, "I wish you'd let me thank you for your work at our concert. It was a great success. Everybody's been talking about it to me, and praising it. They all agree. I hope you'll be persuaded to come and help us again. . . ."

Dorothy's eyes closed. Her heart was beating in her throat. Oh, it was sweet—coming now, when she had been so cruelly unhappy. And Louis? What did he think? He was coming back into the room, his head down, his hand still upon the door. But to her glance of inquiry he returned a little smiling nod that was quite sufficiently emphatic for Dorothy. If she had only been able to read his heart!

V

William did not arrive until five minutes later. He was preoccupied. His heartiness was gone. He looked small and out of place in the large drawing-room. A whitish look in his generally fresh-coloured face showed that he was discomposed. Something had excited him. He was perfectly friendly to Emanuel, but he was subdued. Dorothy easily read all that. But what had happened? What had Flisk said or done? She would have to wait.

Not for long. William presently moved round to where she was sitting, and where Louis was standing near her. He drew a chair to her side.

"Louis, boy, don't move away. It's all right," said William. To Dorothy he murmured: "I'll just tell him how it arose. . . . Well, Louis; just as we were coming over this afternoon a man came up and stopped me. Flisk. Know Flisk's? Round in Station Road. He's got a small shop there—a grocer's shop. Very cramped for room. Now, I've seen a young fellow about on a bicycle, calling for orders. Most of the orders he got were from my customers. Understand what I mean? When the tide set against me, Flisk took the trade. He was getting it all. Well, it was Flisk who stopped me. I took him upstairs—had a chat. He told me all about his business. How he started, and what his profits were,

and so on. And he told me the big jump he'd made since Peel went. Finally he offered to buy my business. Well, Louis, I don't mind telling you that things have gone from bad to worse these last two months. I never knew a business tumble down so quickly. The only big account we'd kept in the whole place was your mother's. She never deserted us. . . ."

"Good mother," agreed Louis.

"That was the only one. All the others—piff. Closed down or starved. Very well. What's the outlook? Nil! The takings have been smaller this week than ever. Flisk told me that he'd been told by half-a-dozen people that nobody was going to deal with me. I'd lost it for good. Well, whether that's true or not makes no matter. It looks like it. He offered to buy the business . . ."

"I hope you won't sell," cried Louis impulsively.

"He offered to buy it for less than I paid; but about fifty times more than I should get on the present turnover. He'd take over the shop and the stock immediately. . . ."

"Oh, Dad!" cried Dorothy.

"I haven't closed. I wouldn't, without talking it over with Mum here. But I've made up my mind. I've made up my mind to sell. I'm going back to run my own shop in Holloway, where I'm known and where I can make my business pay. I'm not a young man, and I've got nothing to fight for except peace and quiet. I've had just about enough of Beckwith, Louis; and my own opinion is that it's best to cut the loss and make the best of a bad bargain. We'll see what Mum says. That's what *I* say."

Dorothy and Louis looked mutely at each other. Dorothy's first personal thought, after a general excitement and response to William's candid statement, was: "We shall go. . . . He'll come once or twice . . . and then,

never. . . . Perhaps it's better: oh, perhaps it's better!"

vi

There seemed nothing else. Mrs. William moved resolutely forward in her chair, perfectly conscious of William's excitement, and determined to know the reason of it. In her concern she once addressed Mrs. Vechantor as "ma'am." That was her one lapse from propriety during the whole afternoon. Otherwise she had been perfect. Reg. was already upon his feet. William, putting down his tea-cup, apologised to Mrs. Vechantor, both for his lateness and for his early departure.

"The fact is," he explained, "Mum here won't be happy till she gets home and has the whole story. She's got the fidgets now, as you can see. . . ."

All rose, and Reg. was first out of the room.

"I wish you'd let Dorothy stay . . . I wish you'd stay, dear," said Mrs. Vechantor. "Wouldn't she stop to dinner? Need she come now?" To Dorothy she added, with an appealing air that was delightfully refreshing: "We'd take great care of you, and . . . But I haven't heard any music for months, and I want you to play a little. And, besides, I don't want to lose you. . . ."

Dorothy, as red as a rose at such kindness, could think only in terms of gratitude. So she stayed, with a brimming heart and great tender eyes that made her mother think of a little girl, years before, who had been her mother's darling, and who had never ceased to be that, in spite of her maturity and the passage of time.

CHAPTER XXIV: SUNDAY NIGHT

i

THE dinner that followed was for Dorothy an exciting experience. She had never seen so beautiful a table. Round a display of flowers which could only have been grown in perfect hothouses, the parlourmaid, who had a natural talent for floral decoration, had laid exquisitely-coloured berries and small leaves in a pattern. The silver shone brilliantly. Candles reflected the light downward and created a thousand soft sparkling glimmerings wherever it caught and enhanced the glow of metal or china. Above the table was a mellow darkness, unpierced by any vehement ray. All was harmonious. The sound of Rosemary's dress was the faintest rustle. Stillness was everywhere. Dorothy was in a dream at all the loveliness she felt and saw in this delightful room. But her dream was not wholly happy, because it forced into her mind the contrast between Louis's home and her own. The William Vechantors, although happy and vigorous, had less refinement than this; and to Dorothy, who was naturally refined, but whose taste was bounded by her experience of the possibilities of such craft in display, the scheme of Apple House, so delicate and so assured, came as something of a blow. How was it possible, she thought, that Louis, who had been in her home, could ever imagine that she, given opportunity, could have made a home as perfectly ordered as this? She could not have made it. The knowledge pressed upon her

heart. There was so much that she had never taken into account. She had thought love was enough; but love was only a sort of child's nonsense as soon as one came into touch with the realities of such things as these. It had always been impossible to think of herself as living at home with Louis. Only now did she realise it. She realised again, as she had realised that other day, that her thoughts of him had been the thoughts of an inexperienced girl. Every sparkle that caught her eye quickened Dorothy's sense of this. Deeply moved, she became timid, ashamed; a sense of failure, of ignorance, weighed her down. She was so easily affected by external surroundings, and so quickly aware of whatever was maculate in herself, that she had not even the curiosity which a more stubborn girl would have brought to the examination of the meal and its adornment.

And then, while she was still struggling with her too-painful sensations, Dorothy looked at Mrs. Vechantor, who was so beautiful and so much at ease amid the surroundings of her peaceful home. Mrs. Vechantor was smiling at her with so much affection that Dorothy, for shame, grew bewildered. Her eyes fled miserably before such kindness. And in that moment she had the strange thrilling emotion that comes from a subtle knowledge. She felt that they all liked her, that they were all . . . somehow, and without obtrusiveness, treating her as quite perfectly one of themselves. She caught a glimpse of Mr. Vechantor's approval of herself. He had noticed her pretty hands, and the almost frightened inquiry that was shown in her mouselike silence. At Louis Dorothy dared not look. He was opposite to her—fortunately behind the spreading flowers, so that she was blessedly hidden. She was hidden, and in all this quietness her heart was beating as if it would never stop. A strange exultancy came into Dorothy's heart. It was like a mysterious response to a

rising ecstasy of understanding. The spirit that pervaded this silence was understanding. . . .

All her fear gave way before a tide of unbelievable happiness. Her pale face flushed. She found herself talking quickly, eagerly, naturally. They were all so kind. She *could* not feel afraid of them. They were wiser and better than she; but because of the beauty of their souls they bridged the distances by which they were separated from her. Magically, they loved her. She was alight with gratitude and shy answering love. She was not Dorothy, not the girl who had been afraid; she was somebody in a fairy dream, a Cinderella with midnight far distant, enjoyingly aware of her good fortune. She was, for this little time, as she snatched at the pride of this tremendous hour, a princess, transformed—as beautiful as they. Such trembling happiness Dorothy had never known. She was carried upon the wings of her fancy, up and up to unwonted heights of achievement. Not hers to doubt for this evening. She was happy. She was liberated, a bird carried upon the blessed winds of love, right into the ecstasy of happiness.

ii

It was no wonder that Dorothy played well that night. She played with all her heart. She played only those things that had a sweet meaning for herself; and as she played her eyes were alight with this new happiness that had made her a queen. She did not think of her playing; all she did was to make those who listened feel as she herself felt. It seemed as though she could never be tired, as though the piano sang to her. All its hardness melted; its cadences were as tender as the cadences of a magic harp. If Dorothy was transfigured, so was her instrument; and Mrs. Vechantor, listening with such in-

tentness, knew that it was Dorothy who sang when the music sang. They all three sat with perfect attention, so that it would in any case have been a pleasure to play. Upon such a night it was a happiness almost unbearable in its sweetness. Dorothy would never forget it: she had never been so happy.

Exulting still, she afterwards sat and talked to Mrs. Vechantor, vivid with this secret joy in their kindness, in their love for her. The world was wholly changed. It had become beautiful as they were beautiful. She was standing upon tiptoe, bountifully bestowing her love upon the immeasurable world. Life was different. She was drunken with a sense of its difference, its new simplicity. It was like the Spring, opening the treasures of the earth to her adventurous command. The unhappiness, the miseries she had known were shrunken, like candles before the dawn. She was alive, tingling with new-found knowledge. It was all a part of this fairy gold of love.

iii

At parting she was trembling with her heightened emotion, her cheeks bright; a new curve in the soft contour of her face. She was soft as a little bird in Mrs. Vechantor's quick embrace. And when Louis and she were out-of-doors in the melting whiteness of the moonlight she trembled still, looking up at the moon's face with an exulting gravity that had no place in any memory of the past. The moon was so clear that every part of the garden was black or silver, frozen and beautified by the clear radiance. The night was still. They could hear nothing but the sound of their own footsteps. Upon the common there was only the sense of this one sheet of unrelieved quicksilver. The houses were picked out so sharply that they stood out in definite lines against

the sky. The black trees, motionless, were webs and traceries more precious than any Dorothy had ever seen. How silent, how full of emotion was everything about them. The town was asleep, dreaming. It was a fairyland.

Slowly that mood changed. She was walking beside Louis in that wonderful world; and she could see him and hear his steps. She had an extraordinary desire that he should touch her, that he should take her hand. She did not want him to speak. She wanted nothing but the knowledge that he loved her as she loved him. It was a knowledge given best, not in words, but in a single glance, when for once they should have no veil between their two hearts. She wanted nothing. All was precious and wonderful to her, and her trembling hesitation only the fear that the spell should be broken. If it failed for one moment, she felt that her heart must break.

Louis took her hand. He stooped a little and held it, and drew it under his arm, bending towards her. Both were trembling, but not with unhappiness.

"Funny . . . I've wanted to say it all the evening," he stammered, in a thick voice. "Isn't it funny that I can't say it. . . ." He was laughing a little, trying to speak naturally, and afraid to speak at all. Dorothy felt her heart leap, and then suddenly flutter in her throat.

"I knew . . . I *knew* . . ." she began, the word long and thrilling, as a mother speaks to her baby.

Louis took both her hands and slowly kissed them; and she was gently in his arms, and happy, laughing with a kind of nonsensical laughter at his trembling awkwardness and her own sense of something that was greater than joy, greater than happiness. They stood embraced, eyes reading eyes, eyes giving messages of love and trust, both suddenly serious and passionate.

iv

Without meaning to do so, and quite unaware of the direction of their steps, they went beyond the edge of the common and down a winding lane that led to the east. They now seemed so remote from the world in that starry night that neither took account of time or place. It was enough that they were happy and together. For a little while they were silent, until their feelings surged up into a bubbling of desire to talk and to exclaim aloud their rapture and their naïve amazement at the simplicity of every aspect of life.

"Until this evening," Dorothy said at last, "I didn't see how you could possibly love me. And yet that's not true. I see it isn't true. I always believed it. I was unhappy, and doubting; but I couldn't ever lose the stealthy hope . . . I hoped and hoped. . . . And then whenever I woke up I got discouraged, and saw there was so much that might keep you from loving me. I feel . . . Oh, Louis, I feel so ignorant; such a common girl, in a way. . . . Not common, but poor. As though . . ."

"Ah; but Dorothy . . . There are such thousands of things to tell. Things for you to forgive . . ."

"Forgive!" she cried, exultingly incredulous. "As if I should believe that, my dearest."

They both laughed a little, close together in the darkness, and Dorothy's breast against Louis's arm, so that they seemed to be walking together out into the unknown distances.

"Nevertheless," Louis went on, "I should like to tell you . . . I want to tell you all there is to tell. About, for one thing, Veronica. Ah, you don't mind her name now!"

"Not now!" Dorothy agreed, with a sublime consciousness of pity.

"You did this morning. You were jealous of her this morning. And I was frightened of you."

"Hoo! What nonsense!"

"Terrified. And I must tell you that . . . ever such a little while ago I was trying to persuade myself that I was in love with her. I didn't succeed—don't ever think that . . ."

Dorothy had a sharp pang. Her pity for Veronica became a poignant reality; not the lazy complacent contempt she had felt at first. She thought suddenly of Veronica standing before Miss Lampe. But she was merciful. It was no jealous self-love that kept her from revealing Veronica's secret. It was a treasure of kindness that kept the truth unspoken.

"Louis . . . I know you love me," she said quietly. "I feel it. . . . You needn't tell me about Veronica. I know it better than you could tell . . ."

"Not the truth, my dear. I'd like you to hear that; because I want to feel that I've told you. You needn't listen . . ."

"Silly!" said Dorothy; and listened to his voice, and not to his words, because she was in love with him, and thinking about the marvel of it. So they both had their satisfaction, and Dorothy never knew about Veronica. In this she proved herself wise and odd, quite unlike other girls, as in many respects she was.

The short recital of Louis's affair with Veronica was quickly ended; and they were once more in perfect communion of spirit. They went on along the winding lane, and stopped and hesitated about turning or going farther. It was nearly eleven o'clock; and to be abroad at that hour in Beckwith is unusual. They were about to turn, therefore, when, close beside them, at the other side of the hedge, they heard a quick fluttering, a little gasp, and the sound of a kiss. Instinctively, Louis held Dorothy

more tightly, in case she should be alarmed, and cry out; but she was perfectly still, secure in his nearness. And then came a smothered voice, saying: "My God! Vera, you madden me. You *must* tell me."

A shock ran through both. Both moved away, ashamed and embarrassed. They heard Veronica's voice, very clear in the silent night, say breathlessly: "Don't be an idiot. Of course I will. I want to be married *soon*. . . . *Soon*." There was another kiss. Dorothy and Louis, still moving away from that place, hastened their steps, treading like mice along the soft roadway. Both had grown suddenly pale, both were agitated—not at peace, as they had been together, but miserably excited at this unwelcome eavesdropping. When they were at some distance Dorothy, scourged by the knowledge which she alone had of Veronica's real secret, chilled with horror of the meaning of the words they had both overheard, whispered:

"Oh, Louis! Who was it?"

"Dumaresque," he said briefly.

V

They walked quickly now, both feeling quite different, anxious only for the parting, since the first bloom of their joy had been spoiled by contact with a love-scene so unlike their own, to which each in private had an uncomfortable key.

"Louis dear," Dorothy suddenly said. "When we're married . . . let's go right away from Beckwith to live. It's hateful. I couldn't bear . . . I've got a dread of it . . ."

He pressed her arm, hearing the quiver in her voice.

"In London?" he asked. "I don't like living in grime. Do you?"

"No."

"We'll go somewhere that's like Beckwith. But that isn't Beckwith. That's different from Beckwith . . ." He was earnestly coaxing.

Dorothy was silent for quite a long time. Before she spoke they had almost reached the moon-drowned common.

"I've been thinking, dear," she said at last, as though she were rather unwilling to speak. "I've been thinking whether perhaps Beckwith . . . that it isn't altogether a place at all. I mean, whether it isn't a sort of disease. If you live in London you hardly know your neighbours —one on the right, one on the left. We did, in Holloway. And no more. You have your own friends. Nobody else cares twopence about you. . . . That's in London. But London isn't England. I've been wondering if, directly you go to *England* to live, you don't find Beckwith. Dear, I don't want to be cruel. I'm not cruel. But I can't think of this place—this dear, lovely place—as making its own people. Aren't people everywhere alike? This is what I thought: isn't Beckwith any small town in England? Isn't the choice between London—that's heartless—and Beckwith where your life's everybody's business? If you have to choose, what will you choose? Louis dear . . ."

Louis listened in silence to her painful speech, made shrinkingly, and with many pauses; but full of the candour that made him love her with all his heart.

"Oh, London!" he cried suddenly. "London, for God's sake!"

They stood then upon the edge of the common, looking over its clear expanse, at the houses and the little shops that fringed its borders. Beckwith was asleep, and these two lovers, standing in the moonlight, linked for ever in a common sympathy, observed how still it lay in the peace of that wonderful night of stars and clear air.

"Lovely Beckwith," Dorothy said tenderly. Then, with a slight shudder, as if the wind had become chill, she added in a low voice: "Poor . . . poor people . . . Shut up in their houses and their shops, and never seeing outside . . ." Turning to Louis she raised her hands to his breast and was held close to his heart. "My dearest!" she went on soberly: "You mustn't think I'm so cruel. I hope you won't. I'm not cruel. But I think I hate stupidity worse than anything on earth, because it frightens me and crushes me . . ."

EPILOGUE

A MONTH later Mrs. Jebolt and Mrs. Callum were having tea with Miss Lampe in the little house near Beckwith railway station. They had just seen Mr. Chator, a very old gentleman of the neighbourhood, hobble by the house to catch the quarter-past four train. He was going to London, they knew, because a dispute had arisen over a deed, and Mr. Chator was going to see his lawyer at five o'clock and was then going on to the home of his married daughter, who lived at Wandsworth Common and had as many as six children.

The three ladies were sipping their tea with relish, and they had all agreed that the Spring weather was promising finely for the year. Already they had made each other sundry communications of a parochial character, when Mrs. Callum said:

"Do you know Nurse Clara-Smith?"

Mrs. Jebolt did not.

"She's such a *nice* woman," said both Miss Lampe and Mrs. Callum. Miss Lampe added: "She's what I call a really *nice* woman. So good and kind. . . . To everybody, without exception."

"Of course, I've heard of her, and seen her," Mrs. Jebolt hastened to assert. "I only meant . . ."

"Oh yes. . . . Of course, everybody knows *of* her. She's been attending a maternity case in the town . . . a Mrs. Cupples. . . . She lives in one of Mr. Ashton's houses in the Maple Road. She's not a member of our

church. You wouldn't know her. A most interesting case, Nurse Clara-Smith was saying . . ."

Some details were given, of an intimate character, much relished by all, particularly by Miss Lampe.

"I think it's such a pity Louis Vechantor married his cousin," said Miss Lampe, following the course of the conversation. "You know, I think it's positively sinful for cousins to marry. The children are *always* born blind, or deaf-and-dumb. It's wicked!"

"Oh," said Mrs. Jebolt. "It's only *first* cousins that there's a danger . . ."

"I thought it was all. Really . . . really . . ." said Miss Lampe, nodding and opening her eyes. "They're not *first* cousins, of course. . . . But it's very, very dangerous, I'm afraid . . ."

"It's not only deafness," pursued Mrs. Callum. "Not only deafness, by any means. . . . Now you know the Toppetts are related . . ."

"Indeed!" cried Mrs. Jebolt, greatly interested. "I never knew that. O—oh, it explains *such* a lot!"

"Oh yes. She was a Miss Tebbs, and she lived with her aunt at Earlswood. . . . Mr. Toppett is the son of her aunt's first cousin. . . . But I didn't think," Miss Lampe ventured, "that the aunt was more than an aunt by marriage. . . . No, I didn't think so."

"Well, anyway, Nurse Clara-Smith says *all* those Toppet children were born . . ."

All the ladies were horror-struck at the revelation.

"It just shows!" cried Mrs. Jebolt. "I was always sure there was something the matter with the youngest one. You know, of course, that Mrs. Toppett's going to have another? What that poor woman will be like in five years' time I can't think . . ." They shook their heads in concert.

"When is Vera going to be married?" asked Mrs. Callum. "You were going to find out."

"Ah yes . . . Some time in June . . ." Miss Lampe said. "It's really . . . Mind, this is quite private; but that Hughes family . . . It would be comical if it weren't so tragic. Really, it's tragic. He-he-he!" She tittered from nervousness, not from spite. "You see they all thought he would marry Judith; and the poor girl's let her feelings . . . She's jealous of dear Vera. But you see Vera . . . and, well, Louis Vechantor. . . . And I rather *think* it was the same with Adela, who's such a sweet good girl. I rather think it was. I thought so when the news of the wedding came. I'm afraid they're all very unhappy. Truly, I am. They're so *spiteful* to one another . . . I'm afraid Vera doesn't want Mr. Dumaresque at all."

"There's one thing, he's got plenty of money," asserted Mrs. Callum. "You'll find they'll settle down all right. Once Vera's got a house and servants . . . She'll soon forget her little fancies. It'll do her good."

"Yes, of course," agreed Miss Lampe. "I *quite* agree. Quite. But if it hadn't been for that girl catching Louis, everything would have been different. Everybody would have been happier . . . Excepting Adela, of course . . . Excepting Adela, poor thing! And I'm not . . . I know it's wrong of me to say it. I know it is . . ." She lowered her voice. "I'm not at all sure that I don't think she *had* been living with him in London. She's a *very* . . . such a bold, daring girl. Very fast, I thought. That sort of girl doesn't see any harm in it, nowadays. You see, they were *seen* . . . Vera saw them . . . Saw him carrying a portmanteau, I believe . . ."

"Ph. *Vera!*" cried Mrs. Jebolt. "No, I don't believe that at all. Vera would say anything about her . . ."

Momentarily defeated, Miss Lampe paused.

"Well, of course, I must say that I don't think she was *at all* a nice girl. She used language to me that I never expected to hear any girl use. . . . Did you know she called me a . . . a lady-dog?"

"No!" Mrs. Jebolt was scandalised. "A girl to say a thing like that! Oh, Miss Lampe! How *awful!*"

"Extraordinary!" cried Mrs. Callum. "Extraordinary! I think it *must* have been some other word."

"No, no. A lady-dog. I *heard* her. Indeed she did. Oh, a wicked girl! I could believe anything of her. I hate to believe anything evil of anybody. I do. I do. . . . It makes me quite unhappy . . . Just as I feel about Mrs. Green's maid. Dreadful, isn't it! She seemed such a *nice* girl. . . . She used to be in my Bible class. . . . But I'm really glad," said Miss Lampe impressively; "I'm really *glad* those people have left Beckwith. It's a relief to get back to just ourselves once more . . ."

"Yes," agreed the others. Mrs. Callum went on: "It's a real relief. They were unsettling. Of course, they *meant* to be. They came here with that idea. It was so *stupid* of them not to see that *of course* we should stand by the Vechantors. And it's such a puzzle to me that Mr. and Mrs. Vechantor don't seem to see through it. You daren't say *anything* to Mrs. Vechantor about it. Or about them."

"No," said Miss Lampe. "I tried once. Never again. Oh, no. . . . Of course, my dears, she's getting old. Yes, getting old. . . . She isn't what she was. But at least they've gone. It's such a comfort. While they were here I felt all the time that they were spoiling our little Cranford. I did, really! It's such a relief now they're gone, and we're settled down again. They weren't at all what I call really *nice* people."

THE END